

TIMOTHY HERRING SERIES

LATE  
*and*  
COLD



GLADYS  
MITCHELL

*writing as*

MALCOLM TORRIE

LATE AND COLD

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# LATE AND COLD

GLADYS MITCHELL WRITING  
AS MALCOLM TORRIE

 THOMAS & MERCER

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To CHARLES AND PATRICIA and to the next merry meeting

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“’Tis late and cold; stir up the fire;  
Sit close, and draw the table nigher;

\* \* \*

Call for the best the house may ring,  
Sack, white and claret, let them bring,  
And drink apace, while breath you have;  
You’ll find but cold drink in the grave.”

From “The Dead Host’s Welcome” by John Fletcher

# CHAPTER ONE

## The Motte and Bailey Affair

The Society for the Preservation of Buildings of Historic Interest, better known to its members as Phisbe, is not (as Timothy Herring has pointed out) an institution for the promiscuous dissemination of unreasoning charity. On the other hand, its full title sufficiently explains its *raison d'être*, for it has never been found guilty of refusing to spend its money where careful and informed research have shown that financial help is both necessary and expedient; on the other hand, as it is extremely wealthy, it is naturally inclined to be cautious.

Timothy was listed on its notepaper as the Society's honorary secretary. The ordinary duties of a secretary—such thankless, necessary chores as taking down the minutes of meetings, sending out notices, keeping an inevitably voluminous correspondence filed and docketed—were carried out by a paid underling whose name (it was Coningsby) did not appear in print either on the Society's notepaper or on the title-pages of its annual *Transactions*.

Timothy had no official duties and followed no particular routine. He was a man of substance and of leisure, unpaid by the Society except for his expenses, (when he remembered to put in a claim for them), and his self-chosen task, in his own words, was to “nose out the wheat from the chaff when we get an S.O.S., and give members, especially

that cynical man our treasurer, the low-down on whether an enquiry seems to be up our street or whether it stinks.”

In other, and, perhaps, clearer words, whenever the Society received an appeal for financial or legal aid, Timothy was prepared to go along and look into the matter. On the strength of a favourable report, Phisbe was accustomed to send along its surveyor and its architect, after which “all matters arising” were submitted to the committee and, if necessary, to a specially convened general meeting, so that appropriate action might be agreed on.

It was on a morning in late April, when his manservant brought in the post, that Timothy was first made aware of the existence of Mr. Pembroke Pritchard Jones and Castell Nanradoc, known subsequently to the Society as “the motte and bailey affair.” The letter had been sent on by Coningsby from the Society’s London headquarters and was in its own envelope (previously opened, of course, by Coningsby in the performance of his duties) enclosed in a larger one which bore the Society’s superscription. The writing on the letter was in a dashing hand which, but for the signature, Timothy would have guessed was feminine, and the notepaper was cheap and did not match its original cover.

“The undersigned (the letter stated) has recently become the owner of a valuable property of considerable historic interest but in a bad state of repair. To render it habitable for the writer and three children presents a financial problem too unwieldy for the undersigned to surmount without assistance. As I understand that you take an interest in repairing old buildings, I hope you will see your way to . . .”

Timothy finished his breakfast and then rang up Phisbe’s London headquarters.

“Coningsby? That letter you’ve sent me from a Mr. Jones of Earls Court. This Nanradoc Castle. Do we know anything about it?”

"I have looked up the archives, Mr. Herring, but we have no note of it."

"Oh, well, write back and promise that the letter will be placed before the committee at its next meeting, but damp the correspondent down a bit. I don't think he's our cup of tea. I'm sending the letter to our president with a covering note to that effect. The chap seems to think it's our business in life to re-house him and his family, and I really don't think we can wear it."

"Pardon me, sir, but could there be two people named Pembroke Pritchard Jones?"

"How do you mean?"

"The Pembroke Pritchard Jones I've heard of, sir, is an artist, and exhibits in Chester. He is a painter whose works are already being collected by connoisseurs. He paints landscapes, I believe. I saw an advertisement of an exhibition of his work last autumn."

"Oh, well, he was probably staying in Earls Court when he wrote to us."

"Pardon me, sir, but I think it highly unlikely that a gentleman of the upbringing and eminence of Pembroke Pritchard Jones would have been staying at the address given in the letter. I reside, as you know, in West Kensington, and I know the Earls Court district very well."

"You mean it's a shimmy address?"

"I would not go so far as that, Mr. Herring, but it certainly is not in the best part of S.W.5, and, if you will forgive me for offering advice, I think you should treat this application with great caution."

"Oh, well, thanks for the information, Coningsby. I'll include it, and your advice, in my note to the president." He wrote this note the same day. It was expressed in his usual casual, informal way—he and the president had been friends for several years—and concluded with the words: "I rather like 'a financial problem too unwieldy for the undersigned to surmount.' I'd like to meet the bloke who

penned that incredible sample of English. By the way, in spite of his Civil Service antecedents and his far too respectful attitude, Coningsby is a likely lad and deserves (and, no doubt, desires) a rise in salary. Remind me to bring it up at the next committee meeting. He obviously thinks there's something very fishy about our latest correspondent, and a tip-off of that kind is useful. Anyway, I shall push along tomorrow to take a look at this 'valuable property of considerable historic interest.' It may be good for a laugh, if nothing more."

He put the letter on the hall table ready for the post, and went out into the garden. He had recently moved house, and now lived in the Cotswolds in a converted sixteenth-century inn which had been built round a small courtyard. He had completely enclosed the courtyard by adding an entrance vestibule and a square hall, and had sunk the courtyard by three feet, surrounding it by a kind of cloister walk. By putting a roof over the whole, he had made an attractive thing of it without sacrificing the charm of the original building, and it was a house in which all he needed, his sister was apt to inform him, was a wife.

To reach the garden he had to take a few steps along the cloister walk, pass through what was now his library, turn and cross a lawn, and then, by way of a wicket gate, he was in an illogical combination of orchard, flower beds, and vegetable plots. It looked inconsequent and haphazard, and a wife, he sometimes reflected, would have made him alter it, but his cook and her kitchen-maid liked it as it was, his manservant ignored it, and his gardener, who was a local man and had known the place when it was the only inn for miles around, was more than content to look after the garden as it was, for he saw no reason to criticise it. It was as it had always been, and therefore it was right.

Timothy's interest in it—apart from a liking for fresh vegetables and flowers, and an appreciation of home-grown fruit from apple, pear, and plum trees and the raspberry



canes—was chiefly in the view from its north-west aspect. What was more, the country beyond the Severn and away to the Welsh Marches had suddenly gained a new interest. Somewhere in that direction lay Castell Nanradoc, that mysterious fortress. On the following morning he was on his way to it.

He had friends in Shrewsbury, but decided not to contact them that night. They were Tom and Diana Parsons. Tom was Phisbe's architect, and it would be time enough to put him in the picture when the preliminary visit to Nanradoc had been paid, so Timothy stayed the first night at an hotel. Next day, after stopping on the road for coffee and to make enquiries, he was fairly on his way to the Pass of Nanradoc and its castle.

The road was narrow, wild, and beautiful. It wound among the mountains and was bordered on one side by a turbulent stream which had its origin on the slopes of Snowdon, and on the other by the menacing heights whose foothills had been cut into when the Pass had been broadened and made into a road. He came in sight of the ruined keep before he had expected to do so. It was set well back, and had been built on the highest point of a bracken-covered hill which showed brilliantly green against the sombre mountains behind it. The road bent sharply leftwards past the castle, giving the impression that the ancient fortress and its hill blocked the way. Further on there were woods, and, Timothy had been told, a little village.

Timothy pulled up on a verge beside the stream, making certain that his car was off the road. He left it, crossed over, and looked for a path to the castle. He found one, rough and stony, which led deviously upwards through the bracken. It came out at last upon the hilltop.

There was a good deal more of the castle than could be seen from the road, and, apart from the keep itself, there were substantial remains of outbuildings and of the curtain wall against which they had been erected. There were also

impressive although broken blocks of stone which lay in untidy heaps inside what had been the bailey.

The keep itself was a round tower. It had a ragged opening where the door had been, and the walls were eight feet thick, but, inside the tower, the floor was not more than twenty feet across. A depression in the centre indicated the site of a well. Three deeply recessed and narrow windows inadequately lighted the place. There were two newel staircases built in the thickness of the walls, and the tower was roofless.

Timothy climbed one of the staircases. It grew narrower as it mounted. The parapet at the top had crumbled away, and there were great gaps in the sentry-walk round the battlements, but, from the breezy perch he had reached, Timothy had a fine view of the road as it wound through the Pass, a prospect of looming mountains, and a glimpse of the flashing silver of a lake.

At the point where the staircase narrowed there was a blocked doorway, indicating an entrance to what had been the first floor of the tower before weathering and neglect had rotted the planks away. The tower itself was so narrow that it seemed unlikely to have been a family dwelling. It must have served merely as a look-out or as a last stronghold in time of trouble. The first-floor chamber had been nothing more than a guardroom, and the well in the ground-floor chamber would not have been the only one in the castle, but merely the least accessible to an enemy. He made his survey and then attempted to climb the other staircase, but it was crumbling and dangerous, and, just above first-floor level, was completely broken away and continued upwards as a ragged, insurmountable shaft, so he left the keep and turned his attention to the scattered remains of the domestic quarters and the remnants of the curtain wall which had protected them.

The largest of the buildings, a rectangular structure with appreciable gaps which had evidently been its doorways,

was almost completely in ruins, but these indicated that they were the remains of the great hall with its kitchen and buttery. Two flankings of stone marked the site of the medieval screens. Beyond this building there were other indications of stone structures, including one which was in surprisingly good repair and might have been a chapel, and others which might have been store-houses and stables. All in all, Castell Nanradoc conformed to the pattern of its time. It was larger than many local strongholds of its type, but it did not compare for size with Edward's great fortresses in the north and west of Wales. In any case, it had been built more probably by a Welsh prince than by an English baron of the Marches, and might have been a bulwark against local marauders in the troubled times between the death of Llewelyn the Great and the accession of his grandson.

Speculating in this way and after this fashion, Timothy left the ruins and took a path which he hoped would lead down to the lake which he had glimpsed from the top of the tower. The way was rough and steep and passed through some woods on the further side of the hill. It did not lead to the lake. As Timothy came out from among the trees he saw in front of him a broad plank bridge with a handrail on either side of it, but, on the further shore of the river which it crossed, his way was barred by a tall, iron, padlocked gate. The path continued on the other side of this and meandered across a meadow where cattle were grazing. Beyond the meadow, iron railings enclosed some park-land on which a house of considerable size had been built. It was, so far as he could determine without closer inspection, a Caroline mansion, squarely built, symmetrical, and, seen from a distance, austere.

He was still studying it, and had begun to regret that he had left his field-glasses in the car, when round the bend of the river came a man and a woman. Both were bareheaded. The woman wore a trouser-suit of green tweed, the man was dressed in a monkish robe girt about with a stout leather

belt. Both persons carried walking sticks and the woman had a camera. Timothy wished them good morning as they came opposite the bridge. The woman bowed, the man put the palms of his hands together, raised his fingertips almost to the level of his chin and inclined his head gracefully over them. Neither said a word. Timothy waited until they were lost to sight at another bend of the river, and then walked back across the bridge and into the woods.

He had not gone far before he was aware that he was being followed. He turned his head, and there, not very far behind him, were the couple he had greeted. He stood aside to let them pass, but, instead of doing so, they halted.

"Would you mind telling us," said the woman, "what you are doing on our land?"

"Oh, am I trespassing? I'm terribly sorry," said Timothy, gazing at her with a smile. "I spotted the castle from the road, and, as there was a path and no warning notice, I thought I'd like to take a look at it."

"You must have known that it belonged to somebody."

"I understand that it belongs to a family by the name of Jones."

"Are you acquainted with the family? Have you met them?"

"No, I have not met them."

"What did you make of the castle?"

"I found it interesting, but not unusual—an original wooden motte and bailey structure, later converted to stone and, I should say, enlarged."

The woman turned to her silent companion.

"Satisfactory, I think? He may come again." Saying this, she took a key from her jacket pocket. "If ever you cross the bridge, beware of the bull," she added. With this, she handed Timothy the key, turned about and, taking the man's arm, led him back by the way they had come.

Timothy, intrigued by the brief encounters, went back to his

car and returned to Shrewsbury, where, this time, he was to spend the night at the house of Tom and Diana Parsons.

# CHAPTER TWO

## An Address in Earls Court

Two days later Timothy went to dine with the president of Phisbe.

"So you've had a look at Nanradoc Castle. Any good?" asked the president. Timothy described the ruins, and added,

"You read the letter I sent on to you?"

"Yes. Come to think of it, although we've had some rummy communications from time to time, I don't remember that we've ever before been asked to house a family."

"It's rummier than that. After I'd had a look at the place and met a couple of rather extraordinary people, I went for dinner and the night to Parsons's. You know he lives in Shrewsbury. He came with me next day to cast his expert eye over the castle. He thinks it wouldn't cost an unreasonable sum to repair enough of it to turn it into a worthwhile show-place, but that, of course, is hardly what the owner wants to make of it, and, as you indicate, it isn't our business to house people."

"What's so peculiar, then?" asked the president's wife.

"Well, Diana Parsons knows a bit about this fellow Jones. She says that he's an up-and-coming painter—well, up-and-come, actually, because people are already beginning to buy his pictures. He lives near Chester with a woman sculptor named Leonie Bing. Rumour has it that they're

married, but they don't admit it publicly because marriage, it seems, is a dirty word among their little circle. Be that as it may, Jones's name must be pretty widely known because, as you know, before Diana told me about him I'd had some of the same information from our omniscient Coningsby. Furthermore, Coningsby claims to know the district from which the letter came, and indicates that it's not at all the sort of set-up to appeal to this reasonably affluent painter."

"Apart from which, Jones lives somewhere around Chester, you say," said the president's wife. "Could there possibly be *two* men called Pembroke Pritchard Jones?"

"It seems highly unlikely, doesn't it, unless they're father and son. Anyway, I'm interested enough to call at the Earls Court address in order to try to solve the little mystery."

"How far do you propose to commit yourself? I don't need to point out that you certainly must not commit Phisbe."

"No further—speaking about committing myself—than to ask to see the title deeds. I rather think the whole business is some sort of impudent attempt at fraud on that couple I met, although I really can't make out what the writer of the letter hopes to gain. He surely doesn't think that we scatter largesse for the asking. I don't know what to make of the set-up, but I'm determined to get it sorted out. It isn't often one gets a mystery handed one on a plate, and I'm intrigued by this one." He did not mention having been presented with a key to the bridge, which, in its way, was the most mysterious thing of all.

He set off at eleven next morning, this time from the president's house in Surrey where he had spent the night. He had not elected to start earlier, as he had a conviction, born of experience, that painters seldom rose before midday unless there was some question of their needing the early morning light by which to work.

Enquiries answered by a policeman led him to the Earls Court address. Regarding the unsavoury house for a minute or two from the driver's window of his car, he felt the first stirrings of sympathy for his correspondent. Dirty and partly damaged front steps led up to a door on which the paint stood in need of renewal. The curtains in the basement were drawn across the window, no doubt in order to discourage the curious. In the window of the floor above, a tired plant wilted in its pot and an empty birdcage hung above it. Everything looked poverty-stricken and lifeless. The street itself seemed asleep.

Timothy got out of the car, locked it, and walked up the filthy steps. He rang the bell but, even as he pressed it, he had a premonition that it was out of order. Then he noticed that the door was not fastened. He hammered on it with his fist and it swung open sufficiently to disclose a wide, bare hall covered with badly-worn linoleum. A small wooden clotheshorse, which partly blocked the fairway, bore a notice. Stepping just inside the doorway, Timothy read the message. It ran:

*Basement Studd. Use lower entrance.*

*First floor Ralley. One loud knock.*

*Second front Carlon. Go up. Two knocks.*

*Second back Jones. After five. Go up. Ring.*

*Third floor to let furnished. Enquire Basement. No Coloured.*

Timothy studied this information and then mounted the stairs, realising, as he traversed the landing in search of a bell at the door of the second floor back, that, if the occupant could not be seen until after five o'clock, his present errand would be fruitless. It seemed strange that a painter should be out all day, but the explanation must be that he had a studio elsewhere. If the elsewhere were near



Chester, however, he could hardly expect to be back in London by five o'clock each day. The mystery, one way and another, grew more baffling.

Timothy found the bell and rang it. From the floor below a woman's voice called out,

"She ain't in yet. Can't you read or something?"

Timothy descended the stairs and was confronted by a middle-aged, corpulent woman wearing hat and coat and carrying a shopping basket.

"Who do you want?" she asked. "If it's that Mrs. Jones, she's not in. She's a schoolteacher, so she says. Gets back about five."

"It was a *Mr.* Jones I wanted to see."

"Well, you won't. There ain't one. Never 'as been, if you ask me. No better than she should be—three kids an' all, and none of 'em ain't got the same father, I wouldn't mind betting. Wedding ring, or no wedding ring, you can't fool all of the people all of the time. 'Course, it ain't no business of mine, but I wonder at 'em keeping 'er on at that school, in contact of them innocent children. I'm thankful *my* kids never went there."

"Then I'm afraid I've come to the wrong address," said Timothy, "but this *is* the one given in my letter, isn't it?" He showed her the heading.

"Oh, yes, that's this 'ouse all right."

"Well, the man I'm looking for is an artist."

"Artist? Oh, Mrs. Studd would never 'ave that sort 'ere! This 'ouse 'as always been respectable, else Ralley and me wouldn't live 'ere, / can tell you."

"Can you give me the address of the school at which Mrs. Jones teaches? Perhaps she'd be able to help me."

"No, I've never 'eard it. She don't talk to the rest of us, except to say good morning now and then. Keeps 'erself *to* 'erself, and I don't wonder at it." She sniffed meaningly and regarded Timothy with small, suspicious eyes.

"How long has she lived here?" Timothy enquired.

"Matter of eighteen months or so, and won't be 'ere much longer, if I know anything about it."

"Oh? Why is that, then? Doesn't she keep up with the rent?"

"Oh, it wouldn't be that. She's regular enough, I daresay. But Mrs. Studd don't like them kids of hers all over the place. She's afraid the Council'll say she's overcrowding. Well, she ain't afraid of that, really, but that's what she's going to tell this Mrs. Jones, not to make unpleasantness chucking 'er out. She don't like to make no unpleasantness, not Mrs. Studd don't, and she won't 'urt nobody's feelings, not so long as she can 'elp it. Quite the lady, she is, in 'er own sort of way, and keeps a respectable 'ouse, and so say all of us."

"Perhaps I could go and talk to her. Is she in, do you know?"

"Oh, yes, she's in all right. You'll 'ave to go outside and down the basement, though, if you wants to see 'er."

Timothy thanked her and sought the basement. The door was opened by an elderly woman wearing a cardigan over her nightdress.

"I don't want no vacuum cleaners nor I don't want no encyclopaedias," she said belligerently.

"I called to see Mrs. Jones," said Timothy, before she could close the door. She opened it a little wider and looked him up and down.

"She ain't in, this time of day. What might you want with her?" she asked.

"This is just a personal call," said Timothy, meeting her eyes.

"Well, this is a decent house, I'd have you know, and I don't encourage gentleman callers, not knowing who I'm letting in." She eyed his Savile Row suit and gleaming shoes with considerable suspicion and disfavour.

"My call is entirely on business," said Timothy coldly. "You don't know where she teaches, I suppose?"

"None of us don't know that. Anyway, if you want to see her, you'll have to come back about five. But no goings-on, let me warn you, else straight out she goes, and no promises. I don't have none of that here."

Timothy went back to his club and ate a solitary lunch.

"Do you know the Earls Court district, Fred?" he asked the waiter.

"Only the bus that takes you to the North Gate of the Zoo, sir. I live in Chiswick myself."

Timothy spent the afternoon in the club smoking-room, and at ten minutes to five he telephoned the garage which looked after his car when he was staying in Town and asked them to bring it round. At a quarter-past five he was ringing the bell of the second floor back in Mrs. Studd's Earls Court residence.

The door was opened by a thin woman wearing a blue overall. She was an ash-blond, was not much under thirty years old, he thought, and might have been beautiful if she had not looked so haggard. He raised his hat.

"Mrs. Jones?"

"Miss," she said. He handed her Phisbe's card. "Oh, yes? Won't you come in? I'll have to put you in the children's room while I give them their tea. This door." She showed Timothy into a high-ceilinged room which contained a two-tiered bunk and a cot. The wallpaper was grimy, but the paint and the bed-coverings were clean. A home-made screen plastered over with children's paintings and some used Christmas cards hid the fireplace, and chintz curtains, patterned with animal figures, helped to brighten the otherwise drab room. The floor was newly carpeted and the door of a built-in cupboard had been left open, disclosing toys and picture books.

There were no chairs, but there was a large, cushioned packing-case. He supposed it held the children's clothes. He seated himself on it and studied the room in detail. He had not seen the children, but could not help being aware of

their proximity, if only because of the noise which came from the adjoining room. He waited half an hour, some of the time seated on the box and some of it in gazing down into small, unkempt back gardens and a solid row of houses beyond them in the next street. At last the haggard woman came back.

"Would you like us to talk in the other room?" she asked. "Then the children can come in here to play." He followed her and found himself in a slightly larger room which sported an armchair, a dining-table, four dining chairs, and a studio couch made up for its daytime appearance. A boy and a girl, obviously twins, and a much younger child, stared at him. Timothy was not at his ease with children unless he was given a lead. These gave him none.

"Hullo," he said.

"Hullo," they responded politely. Then the youngest set up a howl. The woman picked her up and carried her out. The other two children followed. After a minute or two the woman came back and closed the door behind her. She threw school exercise books out of a cheap leather bag and stacked them on the table.

"Marking?" asked Timothy sympathetically. She nodded.

"Got to get them done for tomorrow."

"Right," he said. "I'll help, and then we can talk."

"All right, then." She accepted his offer with indifference. "Please put S in the margin if the spelling's wrong, and correct any very bad grammar mistakes, that's all. *Can* you spell, by the way? Some people don't seem able to."

"Doctor Johnson consulted me frequently when he was compiling his famous dictionary."

"I see," she said, without smiling. She tossed him a marking-pencil and they worked away in silence at the pile of books.

"Thanks," she said at last. "That was kind of you. And now, what have you come about?"

"Castle Nanradoc. I went to look at it."

"Did you? What's it like? I've never seen it. Will your Society do it up for us?"

"Before we go into that," said Timothy, eyeing her with elder-brotherly disparagement, "don't you think you've got some explaining to do?" (Yes, she *was* thin—much too thin, he thought.)

"You mean about signing myself Pembroke Pritchard Jones? I thought it was rather a grand name, and your Society would have to take some notice of it. Pembroke is my cousin, you see, and it's he who's given me the castle."

"*Given* it to you?" He thought of the tweed-suited lady and her silent, monkish companion. "But why would he want to do that?"

"I have no idea, but it really is a godsend, and I can do with one. I want to live there with the children. It would be much better for them than staying in this awful hole. Besides, I've had some pretty strong hints from my landlady that she intends to turn us out, so I've got to find somewhere to go, and the sooner the better."

"Well, I'm very sorry, but what you're asking my Society to do isn't possible, I'm afraid."

"But I'd pay you back! It would only be a sort of loan. I meant to explain that. Didn't I put it in the letter?"

"Have you any idea of what it would cost to make that castle habitable?" asked Timothy, ignoring the question.

"No, I haven't. As I told you, I haven't seen it."

"Well, it would run into thousands."

"Yes, I suppose it would, but so will a house, if ever I can afford to buy one, which doesn't seem very likely at the moment. I should expect to get a mortgage on a house, so I'm only asking your Society to do the same thing, that is, to lend me the money."

"But, my dear Miss Jones, we're not a building society."

"Well, you are, in a way—or so it seems to me," she argued. "You may not do actual building, but you do a lot of rebuilding. I read your *Transactions*. There's a copy in the reference department of our local library."

"Look," said Timothy, on a sudden impulse, "suppose I take you to see Nanradoc and show you how impossible it is that you should live there? When could you go?"

"I couldn't, without the children. I wouldn't leave them here on their own. Mrs. Studd would probably turn them out to play in the street all day, and I couldn't have that!"

"What are they like?—well-behaved? Guaranteed not to open the door of the car and fall out? Not to make themselves sticky? Not to drop dollops of ice-cream all over the upholstery?"

"I couldn't guarantee anything. You know what children are!"

"Actually, no, except by flinching observation. What if I could get them minded for you? Could you come then?" He did not know what induced him to press the point.

"I suppose so. But who would mind them? Bryn and Bron are eight years old, and Miranda is two. It would be no joke taking them on, even if I knew anybody who would do it."

"Are they," asked Timothy, mindful of Mrs. Ralley's insinuations, "all related to one another?"

"Bryn and Bron, the twins, are my brother's children. He and my sister-in-law were killed in an air-crash. There was nobody to look after them, and I couldn't stand the thought of sending them to an orphanage. Miranda is no relation of mine. She's the child of—of a friend who couldn't keep her. She's on the stage, you see, this girl, and couldn't cart a baby about with her. The twins go to school, and I've found a day-nursery for Miranda. One of the women who used to look after her all day, now takes her in until I'm free to collect her. The nursery packs up at three, you see. The babies have their afternoon sleep after lunch, and when

they wake up they're supposed to be collected by their mums, only, being at school, I can't do it, so I'm terribly grateful to this woman, but, of course, I have to pay her. One way and another, it all comes rather expensive, although, of course, my friend gives me something towards Miranda's keep."

"I see." Timothy got up. "Well, I'm more sorry than I can say, and, of course, I'll put it before my committee, but I really don't think we can help you."

"You do say you'll put it before your committee, though?"

"I will do that, of course, but it's only routine, you know. Nothing will come of it, I'm sure. You must make up your mind to face that. And, I repeat, I really am sorry, but it's out of my hands, you see."

"Yes," she said dispiritedly, "I see. Well, it seems I must just put up with things until Mrs. Studd turns us out. Good-bye, Mr. Herring. It was nice of you to call and—and put an end to my hopes so quickly. It's better that way, I suppose."

"Oh, something will turn up, you'll see," said Timothy, with false and caddish cheerfulness.

"Oh, Mr. Micawber!" she said bitterly. "Good-bye—and mind those front steps."

"Wouldn't mind if I fell down them and broke my neck, I shouldn't wonder," thought Timothy, running downstairs and almost colliding with Mrs. Ralley, who, with Mrs. Studd close behind her, was hovering in the passage.

"Did you find her in?" asked the former. The latter merely sniffed.

"Oh, yes, of course," said Timothy. Mrs. Studd exchanged the sniff for utterance.

"Well, you won't, next time you come, young man. I've only been waiting for her gentlemen friends to start coming here," she said. "I know her sort *and* yours."

"A controversial statement," he said, "and one which will bring you up before the courts for slander and

defamation of character, if you're not very careful. I should watch my step, if I were you." He went out to his car and slammed the driver's door with unprecedented violence. "You bloody old vultures!" he thought. "I'm damned if I don't get that woman and those kids out of there, if it's the very last thing I do."



## CHAPTER THREE

### Nanradoc in Sunshine

“Well, of course I’ll look after the woman’s children for two or three days if you really want to go gallivanting off to the wilds with her,” said Timothy’s sister, “but what’s the big idea, and how are you going to explain her at the hotels?”

“Ain’t going to be no hotels. Diana Parsons is going to put us up. Is that respectable enough to suit you?”

“It’s nothing to me what you do. How old are the children?”

“Eight, eight, and two.”

“Oh, well, the twins can’t possibly be worse devils than my Terence and Marguerite, and two years old is my favourite age in children. But what exactly are you up to with the girl? I know there’s some connection with this Society of yours, but how does she come into it?”

“I want to get her and the kids re-housed.”

“What, in this castle thing you’ve been talking about? They’ll get pneumonia.”

“The ‘castle thing’ you mention happens to be her property. At least, she claims it is. I want to take her to see it, and then I want to persuade her to sell it to me, and then I want to talk Phisbe into taking it off my hands and doing it up, and then I think we’ll turn it into a show-place at sixpence a time, and perhaps house a small museum in the undercroft, as they’ve done at Bunratty in Ireland.”

"But couldn't you shorten up the negotiations by getting Phisbe to take it over straight away? Why do you have to be a sort of middleman, and lay out your own money on the thing?"

"Well, Phisbe can be quite long-winded, you know, especially when a controversial proposition is laid before it, and this will be nothing if not controversial. It will have to go before the committee, sooner or later, and I think Purvis, who rather enjoys what I call being obstructive and *he* calls 'looking after the Society's interests,' will insist on a general meeting extraordinary, and that means waiting until near enough to Christmas before anything definite is agreed. Meanwhile, this unfortunate hen and her three chicks are at the mercy of an old bitch of a landlady who's only looking for an excuse to sling them into the street."

"But can she do that?"

"Legally, probably not. I have an idea that their rooms were let to them unfurnished, but I also fancy that the tenant is in no good shape to stand up to all the unpleasantness there would be if she stuck her feet in and refused to play ball with her ghoulish landlady."

"What's she like?"

"Sixty, shrewish, mucky, raddled, rapacious, dirty-minded . . ."

"The girl, idiot, not the landlady!"

"Oh, well, not really such a girl. I shouldn't think she'll see her twenties again, even the latest of them. Anyway, don't you worry. She's not my cup of tea. I like them with flesh on the bones and a smile on the lips. This woman hasn't got either."

"You're going to rather a lot of trouble and expense on her behalf, it seems to me. What, exactly, is the idea? It isn't like you to act Sir Galahad."

"Bless your suspicious elder-sisterly heart! I'm very sorry for her, that's all."

"Sorry for her my foot! I know you, and I know you're stalling. You haven't really told me anything about her. Be a good boy and come clean. What *is* she like?"

"I hardly looked at her—certainly not in the way you seem to think. We spent most of the time correcting children's essays."

"How very interesting! I've never heard of that as the female equivalent of looking at a gentleman's etchings!"

"I don't know where you get these appalling ideas. 'You wasn't brought up that way, Bessie!' Honestly, dear sister, this unfortunate woman appeals to me simply because she's underpaid, undernourished, under pressure, and under the weather, and because I hate the guts of her dreadful landlady."

"So the bleating of the kid excites the tiger?"

"I am *not* a tiger! Anyway, you say you'll take on these babes for two or three days, and for that I forgive and thank you. No, really, do believe me! I'm genuinely sorry for the woman, and that's all."

"I wish pity weren't akin to love."

"It isn't—not in this case, anyway."

"All right. Bring those children when you must, but do watch your step with the girl. I think she's a very fishy customer. What's she doing with three children, anyway?"

"I've explained all that."

"You haven't explained the third one, and neither did she."

"It's no business of anybody except the woman herself, and, as a matter of fact, she *did* explain, as I told you. A friend on the stage, and all that. May or may not be true."

"All right. When do you want me to take on these three brats?"

"I'll bring them on Whit Tuesday. The local schools get a week's holiday at Whitsun, so that's when I've fixed things up."

On Whit Tuesday Timothy met Miss Jones and the children outside a suburban tube station. This was at her request. She had begged him not to call for them at the house. The boy sat beside him in front, and Miss Jones and the two little girls had the back seat until Timothy dropped off the children at his sister's house near Malmesbury. From there he drove Miss Jones to Shrewsbury and gave her lunch on the way.

She talked comparatively little, but seemed cheerful, and, after dinner that evening with Diana and Tom Parsons, she told more about her inheritance. Pembroke Pritchard Jones, her cousin, had given her Nanradoc on condition that she got it repaired.

"Of course, if it weren't for the children, I wouldn't have considered the offer for a single instant," she asserted. "I'm perfectly happy in my job and, on my own, I could afford a small flat. As things are, the rooms we live in are cheap, but, of course, they're not what I want, so when Pembroke made this offer I couldn't help thinking what a good thing it would be for the children to go and live in the country among mountains and rivers and lakes. Of course, I couldn't see how on earth I was going to be able to afford to repair the castle—Pembroke told me, quite honestly, that it was in a very bad state—but then, when I was in the library one Saturday morning while the children were at the cinema, I happened to pick up a copy of *Transactions of the Society for the Preservation of Buildings of Historic Interest*, and I read reports of the help that had been given in restoring various houses and churches and things, and it suddenly came to me that the Society might be able to help me, too. I was rather upset when Mr. Herring said they wouldn't do it, but I've got over my disappointment."

"Yes," said Tom Parsons, "we don't help individuals like that. We can't. It isn't our job. I'm glad Herring is taking you to Nanradoc, because then you'll see just how much would need to be done to put the place into any sort of habitable

shape. Even if it *were* our pigeon, I doubt whether our members would be prepared to spend much money on it."

"Yes, I know," she answered, "and I'm very grateful to him for taking even that much interest. I do realise that my application is hopeless, so I'm just going to make the most of my little holiday. It's wonderful to feel free of responsibility, even for a day or two. Children are very wearing when you have them all the time at school, and then come home to three more of them in the evening."

"Talking of that," said Timothy, "I suppose you really *had* thought out all the snags in connection with living in Nanradoc, before you wrote to us?"

"How do you mean? What snags?"

"Your job. The children's education. Shopping, and all that."

"I hadn't intended to go on teaching. I thought perhaps I could do the sort of thing I've heard they do at Bunratty Castle in Eire—have medieval banquets and get people to pay an awful lot and help themselves out of the dishes and throw the bones under the table and have a minstrel to sing old ballads to the harp, and some big dogs—wolfhounds, I thought—to add a touch of atmosphere. I suppose it sounds mad when I say it out loud, but it seemed quite possible while I kept it to myself, and really terribly exciting."

"Bunratty?" said Tom Parsons. He looked at Timothy and grinned. "Very odd you should say that. But Bunratty is near Shannon Airport and gets lots of American visitors who are prepared to pay the earth for that kind of thing. Moreover, there is an excellent hotel almost next door to Bunratty Castle, so that there is always a clientele with money to spend, even apart from those who land at the airport. Nanradoc has no such help at hand."

"Nanradoc isn't all that far from Betws-y-Coed and other Welsh beauty spots," argued Miss Jones. "It must be quite near Snowdon and Rhyl and Colwyn Bay and Llandudno and all sorts of places where tourists go every summer. Then

one could advertise, I suppose, for visitors. I mean, everybody seems to have a car to get about in nowadays. I'm sure I could have made a go of it."

"And the children's education?" asked Diana.

"I'm fully qualified to teach them myself, or perhaps they could go to the village school for a bit."

"The nearest village school would be at least five miles from the castle, I think," said Timothy. "I don't believe your plans would work out, you know. Had you thought of what you'd have to pay for all the help you'd need in running this medieval banquet business? For one thing, you'd need a first-class cook, apart from waiters and washers-up, and so forth."

"I'd have managed somehow, until it really got going," said Miss Jones, "but I can see it was only a pipe-dream, so what does it matter?"

Upon Diana's suggestion that the following day might be long and tiring, Miss Jones went to bed at an early hour, and shortly afterwards Diana suggested that, as the two men would enjoy a gossip together, she, too, would go upstairs.

Left with his friend, Tom Parsons lighted a pipe, put another log on the fire, smoked ruminatively for a while and then said,

"Well, Tim, what exactly are you up to?"

"Up to? Why, how do you mean?"

"I mean, why are you carting this girl off into the Welsh mountains to look at a pipe-dream?"

"She wants to see Nanradoc, and I want her to see it. I felt I had to convince her that it's out of our terms of reference to repair it so that she and her Pied Piper rabble can use it as a dwelling-place, that's all."

"Why not have written to tell her so? Why the personal involvement? That's what's puzzling me."

"You're as bad as my sister! There is *no* personal involvement. I didn't feel, having seen her, that I could just

fob her off with a letter. Her request will have to go before the committee, in any case. You know that, as well as I do. I thought it might soften the blow a bit if she saw for herself that her proposition is hopeless."

"And since when have you been a buffer between people and their disappointments?"

"Well, actually . . ." said Timothy.

"Ah, I thought we should get at something, sooner or later. You interest me, Timmy. Say on."

"Well, actually," said Timothy again, looking at the beautifully symmetrical grey ash on the end of his cigar, "I'm thinking of making her an offer for the place—enough to buy a small house, I thought. Then I'd get you and Mason to go into the possibilities of restoring the castle, and then I'll ask Phisbe to buy it from me and show it."

"You must be crazy!"

"Granted, but there aren't so very many Welsh strongholds built by Llewelyn the Great."

"This girl may not have a good title to the property. Have you thought of that?"

"Yes, of course I have. Don't worry. I shan't buy a pig in a poke."

"Or take any wooden nickels, I hope. Well, good luck, and don't say I didn't warn you. That girl's young enough to be dangerous."

"Young enough? Thirty, if she's a day!"

"Don't you believe it, sonny boy. She doesn't wear too well, I'll admit—too much to do and too little to do it on—but I shall be surprised if she's yet seen her twenty-fourth birthday."

On the following morning Timothy took Miss Jones to see Nanradoc Castle. He tried to make conversation on the way, but she seemed so *distract*, and her thoughts so much engaged, that he was obliged to give up all attempts to entertain her. He gave her lunch in Chester, but she made no reference to the fact that her cousin, Pembroke Pritchard

Jones, lived in or near the city, and this surprised and puzzled him. Presumably, if the artist had made his property over to her, she must at least have had a letter from him with his address on it.

Arrived within view of the castle, Timothy parked the car and led the way up to the keep.

"Well, there we are," he said. "I'm going to sit here on this chunk of masonry while you make your inspection. Don't hurry. I have a paperback thriller and plenty of cigarettes, and the day is most seasonably clement, so take your time and have your fill."

"All right," she responded. He gazed thoughtfully after her until she disappeared inside the ruined keep. He had warned her that one staircase ended in airy nothingness and that the other was dangerous, and hoped that she would remember what he had said. However, she was out of the tower again before he had risen to his feet to go after her and repeat the warning. She came back to him.

"I see what you mean," she said. "We could never live in that thing."

"Nobody did, except a few soldiers, I imagine," said Timothy. "That was only part of the castle." He pointed to where, at the base of the motte, lay the ruins of the great hall. "Those were the domestic quarters, and you can see what would have to be done to render them habitable again."

"Oh, yes," she said. "It's quite hopeless. It would take a fortune to restore it. I wonder why Pembroke thought we could live in it? He wrote in his letter something about Nanradoc which made me think it was a sort of manor house."

"Did he now?" said Timothy, suddenly enlightened. "Then I wonder . . . Look here, are you game for a little adventure?"

"What sort of adventure?"



"I want to gate-crash a stately home, but I can't do it without a reasonable excuse. You could be that excuse, if you would."

"I haven't the least idea what you're talking about, but I can follow a lead. What do you want me to do?"

"Well, somewhere over there," he pointed to the northwest, "lies the stately home I mentioned. It's inhabited, I think, by two rather unusual people. I'd like you to meet them. By the way, do you know your cousin Pembroke by sight?"

"I haven't seen him since I was a child. He sent Miranda in charge of a hired nursemaid."

Timothy made no comment on this enlightening statement. So the friend on the stage was a myth.

"So you might not recognise him if you met him," he said. "Oh, well, we shall have to chance it. Come on, and watch your step. The path is overgrown and very rough in places. I'll go first until we come to the bridge."

"Wait a minute," she said. She was flushed and looked animated and excited. He could see now that she was younger than he had thought. "You don't mean that Nanradoc really is a manor house, and that Pembroke means me to have it? But that would be absolutely fabulous! Oh, I'll forgive him everything! I'm afraid I've been thinking some rather hard thoughts since I looked at that awful keep."

"Now, steady on!" said Timothy. "You're leaping to unwarranted conclusions. There *is* a manor house, yes, but I don't even know whether it belongs to Nanradoc—whether it's on the Nanradoc estate, I mean. I've a strong feeling that two people I met when I came here on my own, although they seem a bit on the eccentric side, are almost certainly the owners. So shut down on the excitement, because I'm merely experimenting. I'm not campaigning for your rights, so, for goodness' sake, don't go getting wild ideas into your head."

“No, but, really,” argued Miss Jones, “isn’t it far more likely that my cousin . . .”

“Nothing is likely. We must see these people and find out what the position is, that’s all. You take your cue from me, and don’t go butting in.”

“Very well,” said Miss Jones. “Just you say.” She followed him down the rough, steep path which led through the woods to the bridge.

# CHAPTER FOUR

## Mr. X. and Madam Y.

The lock on the gate to the bridge had been well oiled and the key turned easily. Cattle were grazing quietly in the meadow beyond the river. A young bull, which Timothy hoped his companion would not notice, snorted at their approach but, content to be among the cows, remained tractable, but Timothy could not help wondering whether the gift to him of a key to the bridge had been made sardonically. Not many people like bulls.

The three-storey house, which was fronted by a flight of steps, and whose severely classical doorway, together with a symmetrical arrangement of rectangular windows, gave it an expression of slightly disparaging surprise, was of the period to which Timothy had assigned it. It was an uncompromising and daunting edifice with a noticeably pronounced stringcourse above the ground-floor windows, flat pilaster strips as decoration, and a steeply-pitched roof. Its solid chimney-stacks also helped to identify it as a Caroline conception, possibly that of Hugh May, a follower of Inigo Jones.

So much Timothy noticed as he and his companion approached the outer door. It was opened by the tweed-suited woman, beyond whom hovered the monkishly-garbed man.

“So our defences are down,” she said.

"You gave me the key to them," said Timothy, displaying it with a propitiatory smile.

"Since you have chosen to visit us, come in. Is this your wife?" she asked, ushering them into the house.

"No. My name is Herring. This is Miss Jones. We are paying no casual visit. We come on a business matter."

"Indeed?" She closed the door behind them. The monkish man had melted away. "We had better go in here."

The room into which she led them had high, narrow windows on two sides and was furnished with deep armchairs, a refectory table, and some modern bookcases. The fireplace retained its original character and the ceiling was decorated with some surprisingly fine plasterwork for a house built so far from any fashionable locality.

"I see," said the trousered woman, when she had seated the visitors, "that you are admiring the ceiling, Mr. Herring. By the man who did Dunsland, in the shire of Devon, I have been told. You say you come on business. Are you making us an offer for this house? Much as you may admire it, it is not for sale. We had better get that clear."

"I'm relieved to hear you say so. It is the last thing Miss Jones would wish," said Timothy. "As a matter of fact . . ."

"Let her speak for herself, if she is the interested party. Jones is an ubiquitous name. Cannot we embellish it before she begins?" The woman stared suspiciously at the second of the visitors, whom plainly she did not like. Miss Jones spoke up.

"My name is Marion Jones. I am the first cousin of Pembroke Pritchard Jones, the painter. I believe he is the owner of this property, or, at least, that he does own some of it. He gave it to me on condition that I lived here—well, here, or in the castle. I'm not sure which."

"An amazing assertion! Are you proposing to dispossess me? I doubt whether you have the right! Perhaps the Father would know." She went to the door, opened it, and shouted, "Needed!" The next moment the robed man had joined

them. "Naughty to listen at keyholes," said the woman, in a tone of indulgent rebuke. "Come in, shut the door, and sit down. We are confronted with something uncommonly like an ultimatum. What do you say to having Marion Jones turn you out of house and home?"

The robed man brushed back his thin brown hair with a thin brown hand. He smiled at Miss Jones with baffling sweetness.

"It had to come at some time," he said. "What reason does she give for casting me into outer darkness, I wonder? We have done all that was asked—kept the place sufficiently in repair, paid the rates, looked after the gardens, and milked the cows."

"Well," said the woman, "I do hope, Marion Jones, that you have a truthful story to unfold. You have an honest face. Has she not an honest face, Mr. Herring?"

"I hadn't thought about it," said Timothy, "but I am sure you will be interested to hear what else she has to say. So shall I," he added, significantly, "for, although I have heard some of her story, I doubt very much whether I have heard it all."

"Well, we have plenty of time," said the woman. "Tea will be at five." She placed a hand on each trousered knee, leaned forward, stuck out her chin, and added, "Fire away, Marion Jones. Keep it clean, for the Father's sake, and spare no detail, however trivial. I will be Sherlock Holmes to Mr. Herring's Doctor Watson."

"No, the other way about," said Timothy. He produced one of Phisbe's official visiting-cards. "This is my interest in the matter."

"Aha! Buildings of historic interest!" said the woman. "Would it really come off, do you think?"

"Would what come off?"

"The repair and upkeep of this building. We are finding it increasingly expensive."

“The repair and upkeep of this building are beside the point,” said Timothy, “at the moment. I think you were prepared to listen to Miss Jones’s story. Now, Marion, fire away.”

“I haven’t met my cousin Pembroke,” said Miss Jones, addressing herself solely to Timothy and ignoring the rest of her audience, “since I was a child. I suppose I would have been about eight years old when I saw him last. That was many years ago. He was the son of the eldest son. My father was the son of the third son. So, as you can see, our branch of the family has never been very well off. I went to London University and took a degree in economics . . .”

“Ah, I thought it wasn’t in English,” murmured Timothy.

“. . . and then I got a job. When I left college I was engaged to be married. Then my brother and his wife were killed in a smash and I made myself responsible for their children. My fiancé couldn’t accept the situation. For this, of course, I can’t blame him, so we ended our engagement, and I had to find somewhere cheap to live. To keep yourself and two children on a young teacher’s salary isn’t all that easy. I found a couple of rooms and got them cheap because the landlady—who’s a prize bitch, anyway—wouldn’t have coloured people in the house, and let us have the rooms cheap to keep them in use. Things didn’t seem too bad until Miranda was wished on me. She was not much more than a baby, and, to keep my job, I had to pay for her to be looked after during the day, and she’s proved, poor mite, an expensive addition to my household. Anyway, the plan was that, if I’d keep her with me, Nanradoc was mine if I’d repair it and promise to live in it and, of course, it sounded to me like heaven except . . .” she glanced at him, “. . . I hadn’t any money for repairs, and, in any case, I had no idea of what the repairs would amount to. I struggled on, and then, one day, I read about your marvellous Society.”

“Ah!” said the woman. “I take it that you ascertained whether the property is Mr. Jones’s own, and, even if it is,

whether he is empowered to give it away?"

"That's just the point," said Timothy, before Marion could speak. "That is the reason—one of the reasons—for our being here."

"I see no reason why I should assist you to dabble in Mr. Jones's affairs. You find me in possession of Nanradoc House, and possession, so they say, is nine-tenths of the law. In this case you may find it is ten-tenths." She spoke sharply. The monk nodded and clicked his tongue.

"I see," said Timothy. "You mean that Nanradoc is not in Pembroke Jones's gift. He sold out his half-share some time ago to you and—er—"

"Father Ignatius," said the ascetic.

"And Father Ignatius. If that is so, a cruel hoax has been wished on Marion here."

"That," said the woman, "is no affair of ours, and may or may not be true. However, as Miss Jones has made a journey to come and visit us, no doubt she will like to inspect what she must have hoped might become her property."

"Oh, really, no, I couldn't think of troubling you," said Marion, distressed. "I'm very sorry if we're here under false pretences."

"But, if you are telling the truth, and are not concerned (with Mr. Herring) in an impudent attempt at fraudulent misrepresentation, you are *not* here under false pretences, and I insist upon showing you round. But, first, do you know of any other members of your family besides Pembroke Jones?"

"He has a much younger sister named Olwen, but I don't think I ever saw her."

"Then she can mean nothing to you. Ah, well, come with me. There is no need for you to trouble to accompany us, Mr. Herring. You can stay and keep the Father company. He has esoteric interests."

Timothy behaved as though he had not heard this. He liked old houses, and had no intention of being denied the opportunity to inspect this one. He said nothing, but followed Marion and the trouser-suit out of the room. The robed man half-rose as though to prevent him, but then dropped back into his chair, produced a string of brightly-coloured beads, and began to mumble. Timothy gathered that he was reciting the multiplication table, although, of course, it might have been his prayers.

Nanradoc House was not a large one, after all. As they were being shown round, it seemed to Timothy a smaller Coleshill, although thirty years later in date. A double staircase rose from the entrance hall, and the large salon of Coleshill was replaced at Nanradoc by the dining-room into which they had been shown. Timothy had noticed that from it a flight of steps led down to a garden at the side of the house. As the hall floor was, in effect, the first floor, two state bedrooms, opening from a corridor which divided the hall from the dining-room, were positioned much as they were at the Berkshire mansion, with drawing-room and parlour symmetrically forming the opposite wing of the building.

This floor of the house was in reasonable repair, although the plasterwork in the principal bedroom and on the drawing-room ceiling was badly stained in places with damp. It was on the next floor, however, that the beginnings of decay were really apparent. Here, it was obvious, nothing had been done to stay the fell hand of time.

"Oh, dear!" said Marion, gazing about her in dismay. "*It does* want doing up, doesn't it?"

The trousered woman made no reply to this, as no reply was necessary. She asked,

"Do you wish to go any higher? We do not use this floor or the one above, which is in a state of even worse repair."

"Oh, we may as well see all that there is to be seen," said Timothy.



"Not unless your Society is prepared to carry out the necessary work," said the woman tartly.

"I am sure you will understand that I can commit my Society to nothing. All I can do is to put each case before my committee, and, to do that, I must have all the information I can get, and that involves seeing all that there is to be seen."

"Very well, then." As she led the way, the staircase and its carved banisters changed in character. The treads became narrower, and a handrail, which gave no more than fingerhold, protruded from the wall. "Of course, these were none other than the servants' quarters," their guide went on. "One could not expect much up here."

"Neither does one get much," said Timothy, gazing at damp-stained walls, floors deep in dust, and windows festooned with the cobwebs of generations of busy spiders. "Well, Marion," he used her name with deliberate intention and effect, "what do you think?"

"It's a house," she said uncertainly, "but, of course . . ."

"I must consult the Father," said the woman, "and (mind how you go on these stairs) take his advice, but, if he agrees, I am prepared to come to terms with you. If Mr. Herring's Society will put this whole house in repair, I am prepared to cede you one floor—the second floor—as a reward for having introduced his Society to my notice. What do you say to that, Miss Marion Jones?"

"I don't think my claim should rest upon your charity," said Marion. "Either my cousin has this property in his gift, or else he hasn't. I don't know who you are—I don't even know your name—but I couldn't live here on a sort of sufferance. Either I have rights or I have not. There are no other ways of looking at it."

They found the Father waiting for them in the hall.

"Well," he said eagerly, "and what conclusion have we come to?"

"No conclusion," said Timothy, before Marion could speak, "except that this—er—"

"Miss Olwen Jones?" the Father asked quickly.

"Oh," said Timothy, "so this *is* Miss Olwen Jones? Any—er—any relation to Pembroke?"

"Do you doubt it?" she enquired frostily.

"Of course not, no."

"Never mind about that," said the monk. "Are your people prepared to put this house to rights?"

"I can commit my Society to nothing, but I think they might be prepared to help you in return for being given the ruins of Nanradoc Castle."

"Oh, but, look here, Tim," said Marion, "whatever the verdict about my right to the house may be, Nanradoc Castle is most certainly mine. Surely there's no question of their giving it away? Pembroke definitely said in his letter . . ."

"Ah, yes, Pembroke!" put in the trousered woman. "Are you sure, though, that he has the castle in his gift? You would do well to make certain of that, before putting in your claim."

"All the same," said the monk, "we should be prepared to make concessions, if your Society—what did you say the name of it was?—I did not read the visiting-card you showed my Sister in Charity here." He indicated the trousered woman and smiled.

"The Society for the Preservation of Buildings of Historic Interest," said Timothy. He added the address of the Society's London headquarters. "Perhaps you would be kind enough to get in touch with us there if you have any concrete offers to make."

"This is a very beautiful and desirable house," said the woman. "It would be worth your while to preserve it, don't you think?"

"No doubt, but there are a good many beautiful and desirable houses of the same period, some of them finer

than this one. The ruined castle, however, is of interest. I notice, incidentally, that the chapel has been roughly and, I would say, recently repaired."

"One must have a place of worship," said the monk, with a negligent wave of his hand. "I am in Orders, as you see."

"Quite."

"For the rest, one must always remember that the shoes, with their tongues, sing carols, and that, with their little eyelet-holes, they can see what is going on." He leered malevolently at Marion.

"You are pleased to be fanciful, Father," said the trousered woman in a tone of sharp rebuke. "Well, Mr. Herring and Miss Marion Jones, we shall be pleased to hear from you at some future date if you intend to proceed with your rather unconvincing claim, but the strictest investigation will be necessary."

"Of course," said Timothy. "Well, Marion, I think we had better go. Thank you for your courtesy, Miss Olwen Jones, in showing us over the house. If you would care to contact my Society—in writing, I need hardly say—I will put your case for the repair of this house before my committee, but on the clear understanding that I can commit them to nothing."

"Oh, surely, surely," agreed the monk. No further mention was made of tea, and Timothy and Marion were about to take their leave when he added, "No lawyers, though. 'A fox may steal your hens, sir, a whore your health and pence, sir, a thief your goods and plate; it ever was decreed, sir, if lawyer's hand is fee'd, sir, he steals your whole estate.' Good afternoon, and thank you so much for coming to see us."

"Is that woman insane?" asked Marion, as they crossed the meadow and walked towards the bridge.

"I don't know. If his shoes sing carols the man may be," said Timothy, grinning. "Incidentally, he came across with the name of Olwen Jones readily enough, didn't he? I may

have a suspicious mind, but *you* have the clear enunciation which carries a teacher's voice to the furthest recesses of the classroom and warns the skulkers in the back row that Nemesis is on their track."

"You mean he heard me mention Olwen Jones? He'd have known her name anyway, wouldn't he? You know, Tim, I'm beginning to wish I'd never heard from Pembroke about Nanradoc. It's hopeless to think I can ever get the house away from people like that. As they pointed out, they are in possession."

"I know, and there's no doubt they'll put up a fight to have it stay that way, I'm afraid."

# CHAPTER FIVE

## A Visit in Retrospect

"Well," Timothy went on, as they sat over tea at the hotel, "what did you really think of them?"

"Well, what did you?"

"I asked you first."

"I don't think I stand much chance, as I said before."

"Of getting Nanradoc House? I suppose you've still got your cousin's letter?"

"I enclosed it with mine to your Society, didn't I?"

"Categorically, no."

"Oh, but, Tim, I must have done!"

"Well, you didn't. If you had, it would have been forwarded to me by Coningsby."

"And it wasn't?"

"Definitely not."

"Then it must still be at your Society's office."

"Not very likely. Coningsby is a most meticulous youth. If you had sent it to us, he would have sent it on."

"Even Jove nods."

"Yes, but Coningsby doesn't claim to be Jove. You'd better have another look for it, you know."

"But, Tim, I sent it. It's just got to be found! It's the only proof I've got that I can show to those two horrible people. You'll have to see this Mr. Coningsby and tell him to find it."

Timothy said nothing. He passed his cup for more tea. He knew Coningsby, that sea-green incorruptible. If a letter

had been enclosed with Marion's application for help, that letter would have been forwarded. He paid the bill at the hotel, and anticipated a silent drive back to Shrewsbury. Marion, however, decided to prattle. She spoke of her school, of the precocious intelligence of the twins, of Miranda's sweetness and quaint sayings.

"Yes," said Timothy, keeping his eyes on the road and his tone light and casual, "I suppose Miranda has the seeds of genius in her."

"Why should you say that? She's a darling baby, that's all."

"I didn't say she isn't. You let a small cat out of a rather large bag when you mentioned Miranda last."

"I did? Oh, I see. I didn't want to let down Pembroke, as he'd been so kind to me about Nanradoc, that's all, so I invented my friend on the stage."

Timothy could not help wondering whether she had also invented her claim to Nanradoc Castle, and little more was said before they got back to the Parsons's house in Shrewsbury where they were to spend the night before returning to Malmesbury to collect the children and take them back to London.

"So here you are, at last," said Diana Parsons. "If you want to wash before dinner, hurry up, and don't bother to change. We expected you hours ago. When you didn't get back for tea we thought you must have broken your necks or ankles or something, climbing about on the ruins, but tell us all about it at dinner—don't stop to talk now, or my cook will give notice."

Dinner, however, proved to be a rather silent meal. It was evident that Marion was tired and unhappy, and not very long after the meal had concluded with coffee, she said that, if nobody minded, she thought she would go to bed.

"What happened, Tim?" asked Diana. "Marion seems properly hipped about something."

"I think she's feeling disappointed about the result of our expedition."

"Really? Do tell us what happened. I didn't like to ask any questions over dinner. The atmosphere was charged with gloom, I thought. Did you get lost, or make improper advances, or fail to make them, or what?"

"*Nee lurng, nee lays oters*, as I was taught by my French master to say. As a matter of fact, we had an exciting and vastly entertaining afternoon, but it doesn't seem to have appealed to Marion as either. Personally, I couldn't have enjoyed it more. I gate-crashed a small stately home, was not particularly polite there, and met two ogres and the prospect of a lost or else a mythical letter."

"Go on. This sounds as promising as *Wuthering Heights* or any other Victorian horror-comic. How did you come to meet the ogres?"

"They inhabit Nanradoc House."

"Oh, the monk and that woman in trousers you spoke with in the Nanradoc woods?" asked Tom Parsons.

"The same. I took Marion to visit them. They were not very pleased to see us, but the woman showed us over the house and they seem to think that Phisbe should do it up for them. In return, they are prepared to allow Marion to occupy one floor. Nothing was said about the children, but I should think the pair of them would frighten children to death."

"What made you take Marion to Nanradoc House? I thought it was only the castle in which she had an interest."

"She took one look at the castle and decided that it was hopeless to think of living there, as, of course, it is. Then I suppose I must have said something which put into her head an idea that was already in my own."

"That when her cousin told her that she could have Nanradoc if she liked to do it up and live in it, he was referring to the mansion, not the castle?"

"Exactly."

"So what happened then?"

"I unlocked the gate which closes the bridge at the further end, and we strolled across the meadow which forms part of the estate, and so into the park and the gardens, and up to the front—or, rather, the garden—door. They don't appear to keep any servants, for the woman opened the door to us herself and showed us in."

"Was she surprised to see you?"

"She didn't seem surprised, but it was all a bit odd, right from the word Go. Marion turned rather belligerent—through nervousness, I fancy—and stated her claim. The woman—whose name is Olwen Jones, by the way, which rather intrigues me—took an instant dislike to her."

"I'm not surprised. Hasn't Marion any tact at all?"

"I doubt whether she realised at first that she was proposing to dispossess these people, and, anyway, at the moment, she is not in a very strong position to do so. She claimed, from the beginning, to have received a letter from her cousin, Pembroke Pritchard Jones, offering her either the castle or the mansion or both. She says she sent the letter to Phisbe, but we haven't seen it. I don't *think* she's an imposter, but I feel inclined to stall a bit. I dislike being taken for a ride."

"She'd hardly make a claim to the place unless she had something to go on," said Parsons. "Anyway, before you left here, she referred to it as a pipe-dream, so her hopes can't have been very high."

"Poor girl!" said Diana. "She may have thought it was a castle in the air, but she's bitterly disappointed, all the same. I expect she's gone to bed to have a good cry. I'll go along in about half an hour and take her some hot milk with whisky in it."

"Not the Glenlivet," protested Tom. "I'm not going to have that tipped into any hot milk. If you're giving her that, she gets it straight, mind now!"

"Tim," said Diana, "what do you make of it all?"



"I don't know yet," he answered. "I shall take the girl home tomorrow and pick up the kids, but I've made it a point of honour to get them out of that ghastly bughouse where they're living, and house them decently. I know where I can put them, too, at any rate for the time being, until we get Nanradoc sorted out. The top floor of the Phisbe headquarters is completely empty, and that wouldn't be too far, I imagine, from Marion's job. The caretaker's wife, for a small consideration, I'm sure would have the youngest kid down in the basement during the school hours, and the twins might have to change their school, but that doesn't matter at their age. Marion's bits and pieces won't take much time to pack up, so, if I arrange with a removals firm, she and the youngsters can be in their new quarters by Saturday. How about that for organisation?"

"What's Phisbe going to say?" demanded Diana. Timothy grinned.

"I always present awkward persons with a fait accompli," he said. "Once Marion is in, they'll have the devil's own job to get her out."

"And what about Nanradoc?" asked Diana. "I mean, if it's really hers—"

"My dear girl, all Marion Jones wants is somewhere respectable and secure for those children. She won't give a damn about Nanradoc if she can get rent-free apartments in Phisbe's clean, safe little nest."

"Rent-free?"

"Of course," said Timothy, surprised. "Surely an indecently opulent Society isn't going to chisel the poor girl out of money for rent? They ought to think themselves lucky to get that third floor occupied and—er—kept warm and dry and so forth."

"I thought our headquarters was centrally heated," said Parsons, grinning. "I also think, Doctor Barnado Herring, that you're a mug."

“Oh, Tom, don’t be a spoil-sport!” said his wife. “I think it’s a marvellous idea, and what you’d better do is to get along there and measure up the biggest room and buy Marion a carpet for it. But, Tim, dear, *something* must be done about Nanradoc. If this poor girl *has* got a claim to it, that claim must be investigated.”

“How right you are,” said Timothy, calmly. “It will be looked into, but I’m much better at that sort of thing when I’m not clogged up with the hopes and fears of the claimant. I want to get Marion off my neck for a bit. You heard what she said, and she meant it. She’s scared of the two odd bods at Nanradoc, and she’s scared of being let in for a law-suit because she’d be sunk if she lost. I want to park her somewhere while I get on with the sort of job which I wouldn’t have missed for the world. Let’s hope that Phisbe won’t find me just one other thing to do before I’ve sorted out Pembroke Pritchard Jones and all his works. I shall go and see him next week, and find out what he really meant Marion to have, or whether the whole thing was a rather cruel hoax.”

“When we began this conversation,” said Tom Parsons, “I got the impression that you thought Marion was trying to pull the wool over Phisbe’s eyes in making this claim, yet now you’re prepared to take up the cudgels on her behalf. Why?”

“I’ve never laid the cudgels down. Those two harpies at that frightful lodging-house got right under my skin. But, as the Nanradoc woman’s name also appears to be Jones, the thought that she is Pembroke Jones’s sister rather worries me.”

“I can’t see why. I mean, why shouldn’t she be? You say she’s in possession at Nanradoc . . .”

“As she was at some pains to point out to me, adding, unnecessarily, that possession is nine points of the law. Nine-tenths was her actual expression, but it comes to the same thing.”

"She's probably right. It's not an easy matter to throw the cuckoo out of the nest, and, in this particular case, it doesn't seem as though she *is* the cuckoo. She's Miss Olwen Jones . . ."

"She didn't mention that, though, until the monk put the words into her mouth."

"Oh, really? That's rather interesting. You'd think she'd have mentioned it at once."

"I know. And there's another point and, I'd be inclined to think, a conclusive one. Marion told them that she hadn't set eyes on Pembroke Jones since she was a child of eight—incidentally, it seems as though you must be right about her age—and that, so far as she knew, she had never met Olwen Jones, his sister."

"And this woman claims to be Olwen Jones. I don't see anything wrong in that. Marion can't say she isn't, if she's never met Olwen Jones."

"Marion *could* say she isn't, but the point didn't seem to occur to her."

"What point?"

"That Olwen Jones is Pembroke Jones's *much younger* sister. Marion does know that much. Now, then, Diana, you went to an exhibition of Jones's paintings. Did you see him? Was he there?"

"Yes. I didn't speak to him, of course, but he was pointed out to me."

"What would you say his age might have been?"

"Oh, forty, perhaps. Not more than forty, anyhow."

"And how long ago was this?"

"It was last summer."

"What would you understand by the expression, 'his much younger sister,' do you think?"

"Anything from five to fifteen years younger, I suppose. You mean this woman who says she is Olwen Jones would seem to be . . ."

“Fifty-five at least, I should say. Won’t see fifty again, anyway.”

“Now that *is* interesting,” said Parsons. “So we deduce from this . . . ?”

“That the woman calling herself Olwen Jones is an imposter. That would be my summing up.”

“Then the real Olwen Jones may have sold out to her and the monkish fellow.”

“If so, why should the woman claim to be Olwen Jones? I’m going to look up Pembroke Jones next Monday.”

## CHAPTER SIX

### Pembroke Pritchard Jones

The omniscient Coningsby knew the address of the art gallery in Chester, and the art gallery, scenting a client and thinking of their commission, readily supplied Timothy with Pembroke Pritchard Jones's private address and telephone number. Timothy arranged, over the telephone, for an interview with Jones. The following Thursday found him leaving his car outside a large new bungalow. It was not so very near Chester, but stood in a village not far from the little town of Mold. The front door was reached by way of a large garden against whose dark shrubs pieces of statuary had been posed, the work, it was reasonable to guess, of the enigmatic Leonie Bing with whom, presumably, Jones shared the wooden studio which had been added to one side of the broad brick building.

The door was opened by a middle-aged, henna-haired charwoman wearing a blue coat-overall and fur-lined slippers. Timothy stated his business and was invited to step inside and take a seat.

"I'll get him," said the woman. "Wouldn't be decent for you to go pushing into the studio just now. They're modelling." She left him in a beautifully furnished room which, nevertheless, was rendered somewhat overwhelming because of the number of paintings which obliterated the surface of the walls. The pictures were mostly landscapes, and he was sufficiently informed to realise that they were

very fine work. Here and there was a portrait, and there were seven nudes observed, Timothy thought, by someone who had a fastidious distaste for the contours of the female body. Not that they were in any sense caricatures. They merely offered, as it were, a devastating criticism of God's taste in line and mass when He created Eve.

Jones was a long time in coming, and Timothy had been able to study his work for nearly half an hour before the door opened and the painter came in. He fell, so far as his appearance went, into one of the more familiar patterns in artists. He belonged to the bulky, red-haired, tweed-clad, paint-bespattered variety, extroverted, jovial, lecherous (probably), and, apart from his smock, which was filthy, he was ideally, blatantly clean, and his trousers were as beautiful as Timothy's own.

"Hullo," he said, "sorry to have kept you waiting, but the model's time was nearly up, and we were determined to finish her off before she went. I gather you wanted to see me about my cousin. Care to stay to lunch?" Without waiting for a reply, he went to the door and bellowed, "What's for lunch, Mrs. Bellows? Will it run to three?"

"Oh, yes, sir," was the reply. "Thirty-three, if you like. It's a casserole and there's plenty of extra veg."

"That's that, then," said the host, coming back into the room. "Well, now, sit down, won't you? Leonie will be in as soon as she's paid the model and scrubbed up, and then we can have a drink. What's all this about Marion? You're not her lawyer, are you?"

"No, I'm not her lawyer," said Timothy, "although, in a way, I have her interests in view. Is she right in thinking that you have given her leave to live on the property at Nanradoc?"

The painter looked him over with cool appraisal.

"You're not going to marry her, are you?" he asked.

"Not so far as I know. Perhaps I had better begin at the beginning. I wouldn't like you to think my questions

impertinent," said Timothy, stiffening as he scented a fight.

"Oh, I'm sure they won't be. You look, if I may say so, a business-like young chap. I'm convinced that any question you asked would be completely pertinent. But save everything up until Leonie comes in. She'll love to hear all about it. Ah, here she is."

If Timothy had formed any mental picture of Leonie Bing it dissolved into thin air as soon as she came in. She was tall, slim, and fair, with green eyes and a thin, wide mouth. Her nose showed too much fighting spirit for beauty and her chin too little. Her whole face, in fact, was a contradiction in terms. She wore black jeans, which showed her long legs to great advantage, and a green sweater which deepened the colour of her eyes and softened the contours of her slightly aggressive breasts. Timothy offered her a smile of respectful admiration to which she responded by giving him a kiss.

"You pet!" she said. "What tide washed *you* up, I wonder?"

"One of those tides in the affairs not of man, but of woman," said Timothy. "Mr. Jones asked me to wait until you joined us before I unfolded my tale. I'll be as brief as I can, because I've really no right to be coming and bothering you at all."

"But we love people to come bothering. Do you think you could go into the kitchen and make me a John Collins, Pembroke, dear? What for yourself? And what for the gorgeous guest?"

These matters being settled, Jones went out of the room and Timothy was left alone with the lady. To his surprise, she became entirely serious, sat down opposite him, leaned forward, and said, with intensity,

"You *look* all right, but I'm not having Pembroke put upon. He's a baby where business matters are concerned, and I might as well tell you at once that I'm his wife, so anything that concerns him concerns me. I hope you get the message." Her eyes, which, when she was smiling, had

dancing gold flecks in them like the sun shining through leaves, had hardened to cold green stone. Timothy was reminded of gangster films.

"Believe me," he said meekly, "I have no desire or intention to put upon anybody. This is it." He handed her Phisbe's card. She studied it. He noticed her long eyelashes and beautifully marked eyebrows. She handed back the card, saying frankly,

"This doesn't mean a thing to me. What's it all about?"

"Just what it says, I'm afraid. We get letters from archaeologists and vicars and owners of castles and moated granges, and all that sort of thing, and it's my job to go along and have a look at whatever it is, and advise my Society whether to play along, or whether to leave well alone. We pay for repairs and general salvage of historic buildings, and such."

"Oh, I begin to see. That tumble-down tower at Nanradoc?"

"Exactly. I went along to look at it after I had seen Miss Jones, and . . ."

"Oh, don't tell me until Pembroke comes back. It sounds as though it's going to be . . ." She did not complete the sentence, for Pembroke returned, ushering in Mrs. Bellows who was carrying a loaded tray.

"Here we are," said Pembroke. "Let's all get beautifully bottled. Now, Herring, fire away. It doesn't matter how long-winded you are, because Mrs. B's casserole can go on stewing 'til Doomsday, and she can take the veg. up and put them over a saucepan of water. We've got her very well trained, haven't we, lovey?" he concluded, addressing himself to the charwoman-cum-cook.

"It's a good thing I'm used to artists," "lovey" responded. "You're a bloomin' funny lot. Mind if I have a bit of a tippie in the kitchen before I go, Mr. Pembroke? I been hard at it all the morning."



"Help yourself, my dear, help yourself. You might see how we're getting on, by the way. I have an impression we're a bit low on some of the ingredients. Phone the bootleggers if we are. You know what's needed. Well, now," he went on, when Mrs. Bellows had closed the door behind herself, "where do we go from here?"

"T. F. Herring . . . what are the T. F.?" asked Leonie.

"Timothy Francis, please, ma'am."

"Timothy was just beginning to tell me all about it when you came in. He went to Nanradoc after he'd seen Marion. Now, Tim, go on from there."

"As a matter of fact, I took her with me the second time," said Timothy. "She hadn't seen it when she wrote to us." He produced Marion Jones's letter. Pembroke waved it aside.

"Give us the gist," he said. "I can't stand the sight of other people's handwriting."

"The gist is that you seem to have given her Nanradoc provided she lives in it. You told her that it was in need of repair, and she asked us to do something about it. Well, of course, we can't undertake that sort of commission—housing people, and so forth—it's outside our scope. However, I went along to have a look, and then I thought she'd better see for herself how hopeless it was. Well, on my previous visit I'd met a man and a woman who seemed to have swapped roles. *She* wore an uncompromising trouser-suit in fairly heavy tweed, and *he* was robed in a monkish sort of get-up and is either insane or phoney. They were kind enough to give me a key to the bridge across the river which separates the castle from the big house, and so, when I went the next time, I took Miss Jones along to visit them, as well as to let her see the ruins."

"Why?" demanded Leonie.

"Does it matter why?" asked Pembroke.

"Of course it does! Tim guessed it mattered, didn't you, Tim?"

"Well, I did rather wonder," Timothy admitted. "There were things I didn't know, and if, in the end, my Society feels inclined to do anything about the castle—*not*, I hasten to add, so that Miss Jones can live in it, but on our own account, if we decide to carry matters so far . . ."

"You would want to know whether Pembroke's title is a good one; what rights his sister has; whether the property is one and indivisible or whether the castle and the manor are separate estates," said Leonie. "It's all right," she added, observing Timothy's surprise. "I began studying law before I took up modelling and carving. I don't remember much of what I learnt, but Conveyancing and the Law of Property have always interested me, ever since I knew that Pembroke had an interest in Nanradoc."

"Please go on," said Timothy.

"Well, you can confirm it all later, but this is how it stands, so far as Nanradoc is concerned, as I've tried to explain to Pembroke."

"I hate the place," he said. "Never want to see it again, and you know why, Leonie."

"We needn't go into all that, darling. It only upsets you, and that upsets your work, and then you upset *my* work, and that upsets *me*. Go away, if you don't want to listen. In any case, we can all do with another drink. Now, Tim, so far as I know, Pembroke and his sister are joint owners in fee-simple of the whole of the Nanradoc estates. His sister who, as you saw, lives there, decided to bar off the bridge because the ruins are open to the road, as you know, and trippers and holiday-makers used to cross the river and picnic on the meadow in front of the manor and sometimes actually walk into the manor grounds. It was very much cheaper to put a locked gate on the bridge than to fence the whole place round, and it didn't spoil the look of things, either."

"I rather suspected that the estate was all one. That means, of course . . ." said Timothy. She interrupted him.

"That means, of course, that while both owners are alive, if one of them parts up, which he has a right to do, the new owner has equal rights with the other partner. *That* means that the survivor, whether he is the new co-owner or whether he is the original shareholder, automatically inherits the lot provided the dead partner leaves no heir. That's Common Law, as I remember it. Of course, in the case of an appeal, they *might* consider another course, but I should doubt it."

"On that, if Mr. Jones here makes over his interest in Nanradoc to Marion Jones, and she survives his sister, who holds an equal interest, the whole estate goes to Marion. That's just what I thought."

"I only meant the *castle* for Marion, not the house and grounds, and she knew I did," protested Pembroke feebly.

"You can't divide it up, darling, as I've explained, unless your sister agrees, and she certainly won't. Why should she?"

"Well, it doesn't matter, anyway," said Pembroke. "There's nothing in writing, as you know. It was only an oral agreement, and Marion hasn't taken me up on it yet."

"An oral agreement is enforceable in law, as again I've tried to explain to you, *once it's been carried out*. Once Marion is given your interest in Nanradoc, with your permission and by your promise, oral or written, she becomes the heir to the estate if she takes up her option and outlasts your sister. Age for age, she's almost certain to do that, and then where does Miranda's claim go?"

"We *had* to get Marion to take on Miranda, you know we did! Neither of us wanted her here."

"Tim will be ashamed of you if you talk like that. He will think we are most unnatural parents."

"There's nothing unnatural in not wanting an unwarrantable interference with one's work. That was our only reason for shunting the kid, and I'm very sorry about it,

but it just had to be. After all, we never intended to have a child."

"I know, I know. Well, Tim, there it is. What can I do to convince this wrongheaded idiot? We may not be willing to have our one and only child to live with us, but we can hardly bounce her out of what's rightly hers."

"Oh, hang it all!" exclaimed Pembroke, with the impatience of a man who feels he is losing an argument. "I suppose, if Marion is the sole survivor, she can *will* the stuff to Miranda, can't she, darling? What's the answer to that?"

"She's got those two brats of her own to think about. That's the answer," said his wife.

"Her brother's children, do you mean?" asked Timothy.

"Bless your kind heart!" said Leonie. She laughed. "I can't understand Pembroke's sister taking to tweed trousers," she added. "It doesn't sound like her at all."

"Well, it all seems quite clear to me," said Timothy's sister. "Miss Jones has not yet been able to take up with her cousin's offer, therefore she's not in possession at Nanradoc, and as there's nothing but an oral agreement—and *that's* been made conditional—I don't see what there is to worry about. It's not *your* problem, anyway. You've done quite enough already."

"I've got her and the kids bedded down in the Phisbe house, but it's only a temporary measure and Marion doesn't like it. Says those big rooms right at the top of the house scare the children. Says the caretaker's wife doesn't like her or them. Says there's a dangerous road to cross for the children to get to school. Says shopping's difficult. Says there are funny noises at night."

"Tell her to get to hell out of it, then. What on earth is the matter with the girl? She's living rent-free, and she's got away from those women who were persecuting her. Whatever more does she want?"

"She wants the Nanradoc estates, I expect. No doubt she's got over her fear of the people who live in the house, and a house, of course, is what she needs. She doesn't say it baldly, but that's what it all adds up to."

"As I say, if only you hadn't put it into her head that she might be entitled—Oh, Tim, you *can* be an idiot when you really get the bit between your teeth!"

"That's just the point. I've involved myself in the business, and I've got to stay involved until I can clear things up."

"But there's no *need* for you to clear things up. So long as the wretched girl isn't able to stake her claim (such as it is), everything is just as it was before Pembroke Jones made her this ridiculous offer."

"Quite. But what happens when she *is* in a position to stake her claim?"

"How can she ever be in that position, Timmy? She can't go and live at Nanradoc while those other two people are occupying the house. They might have her, but they wouldn't have the children, and she certainly can't take kids to go and live among the ruins, unless Phisbe repairs them enough to make them habitable. You say Phisbe won't do that, so what's the headache, my precious? All you've got to do is to go to Marion Jones, talk sense to her, and show her where she gets off. She hasn't really got a leg to stand on."

"Awkward for her when she gets off, of course."

"I'm glad you can still joke about it. There you are, then. Go and put it across her. She's an ungrateful, scheming little cat, I shouldn't wonder, and you're a ruddy imbecile for showing her where she can dig her beastly claws in. Why, she hasn't even got anything in writing to prove her claim. She lied to you about that."

"I know, I know. I blame myself entirely. Of course, the original congenital idiot is P. P. Jones, for leaving the way wide open for her to step along and *stake* her claim."

"The pot calling the kettle black, dear. Suppose Marion Jones leaves the Phisbe house, what then?"

"She won't, until she's found somewhere else to go. That's just the trouble."

"Well, that 'somewhere' won't be Nanradoc, so do stop fretting. Go and see her again, and satisfy yourself that you've been inventing bogeymen."

"I haven't been inventing them. Like Topsy, they just grewed."

He called at the Phisbe headquarters at a quarter to six that same evening. The conscientious Coningsby was just about to leave. His hours were elastic, for on some days there was little or nothing to do, whereas, at other times, it meant, perhaps, that he put in a twelve-hour day. Timothy greeted him and asked how were tricks.

"Not too good, Mr. Herring," Coningsby replied. "I have had to spend a great deal of time with Mrs. Dewes."

"I'm surprised at you, Coningsby!"

"No, really, Mr. Herring! These interruptions for arbitration are beginning to affect my nerves. I am, as you are aware, a mild man, but today I'm afraid I snapped Mrs. Dewes's head off, and told her to refer her complaints to you. I was so much affected that I would have appealed to the president himself to turn this woman and her children out, had you not expressly desired me . . ."

"Yes, quite. I shall have to tell the committee at some time about the illicit nest at the top of our little tree, but I want to choose a suitable moment, and get the president on my side first, before I make my general confession."

"I should be relieved to have the position fully understood, sir."

"Well, I've called expressly to see Miss Jones, so I'll have a word with Mrs. Dewes as well, and see what I can sort out. I'm sorry they've given you the works."

"Thank you very much, Mr. Herring. Good night, sir. Perhaps, if there are any developments—you see, it *is* such

an interruption to my work.”

“I’ll let you know what transpires. Miss Jones is dispensable. Mrs. Dewes isn’t—and that’s that!”

“I knew you’d understand, Mr. Herring.”

There was no lift. On the ground floor was the office block, with the members’ washroom and a couple of rooms given over to the caretaker and his wife, who were also accorded the large attic at the very top of the building. On the first floor were the principal rooms. Here were the committee room and the original ballroom, now used for cocktail parties, conferences with learned bodies and such other Societies as had an affinity with Phisbe. The annual general meeting and the annual Christmas party for members’ children were also held in it, and in its ante-room the more important archives were kept.

On the second floor were the rooms devoted to photographs, plans, and maps showing the scope and range of Phisbe’s activities, together with framed letters from all over the British Isles testifying to the Society’s generosity and kind assistance, and the third floor, ordinarily disused except for the dust which settled on it unless and until Mrs. Dewes suffered an attack of conscience, was now occupied by Marion and the three children.

Timothy climbed the handsome eighteenth-century staircase and knocked on the door, from behind which a considerable amount of children’s noise was coming.

“Oh, hullo, Tim,” said Marion. “We’d better go into my bed-sitter. There’s too much racket in here. Have you come to pay a social call, or are you here on business?”

“Business first,” said Timothy. “What have you and Mrs. Dewes been a-doing to poor little Coningsby? The lad’s a nervous wreck.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. It must be Mrs. Dewes. It’s nothing to do with me. I’m out all day, as you know.”

“You’re in all the evening, and so is Mrs. Dewes.”

"I know. That's just the trouble. Look, Tim, I told you the last time you came, either Mrs. Dewes or I will have to go. As it can't be her, it must be me. She makes our lives a perfect misery. I'm sure they never used that attic before we came here, but now Dewes does carpentry or something up there. I wouldn't mind so much if he'd do it while the children were up, but I'm certain he waits until he knows they're in bed and asleep and then he begins this hammering."

"I'll have a word with him. What about Mrs. Dewes?"

"She won't let the children use the front door or the front stairs. They get home from school before I do, because I have to go and fetch Miranda from the nursery. She sends Bryn and Bron right round by way of that mews and along a sort of alley at the back."

"I see. Well, look, can't you just make the best of it for a bit? After all, the twins aren't babies. It can't really hurt them to go round by the back way, can it?"

"One day it was raining. They got soaked to the skin."

"Yes, but they'd have got pretty wet coming home from school anyway, wouldn't they, if it was raining as hard as all that? Still, never mind. I'll tackle Mrs. Dewes and see what she has to say. All the same, you know, I can't really agree it's any hardship to send children round to the back of the house and make them use the back stairs. Most parents do it, I believe, on the score that children are apt to come in with dirty shoes and tread mud all over the place, and children are death to decent carpets, anyway."

"Mrs. Dewes is paid to keep the place clean, isn't she?—and I don't suppose your Society would go bankrupt if they had to buy a few yards of staircarpet, would they?"

"Look," said Timothy, "I hate to put it in this crude way, but sometimes it's as well to call a spade a spade. You and the children are living here rent-free. You're not expected to do anything except keep your own rooms clean. You're here because you hated the place you came from, and, apart



from all that, I shall have the devil's own job to persuade my committee to accept you as tenants, anyway, but more so if you don't behave yourselves. Forgive me, but you do see what I mean."

"Yes, I suppose I do."

"Then, for heaven's sake take the rough with the smooth and stop making heavy weather!"

"Grin and bear it, I suppose you mean."

"It seems to me you've got quite a bit to grin about and not all that much to bear. And now I'd better be going and having my barney with the Dewes."

"Before you do, is there anything more to tell me about Nanradoc?"

"No, and there won't be, I'm afraid. I'm very sorry indeed I ever took you there. I'm pretty sick with myself to think I raised your hopes. Jones sticks to what he said to you—although he *didn't* write you a letter. You lied to me about that. It wasn't very charming of you, was it?"

"He telephoned me at school. I wrote asking for more money for Miranda, and gave the school number because I knew he hated writing letters."

"Anyway, apart from the fact that you've got nothing in writing, until I came lumbering in, and tried to be clever, you firmly understood him. He meant you to have the ruined castle if you would get it repaired and wanted to live in it. He *never* intended to give away his rights in the Nanradoc estate. You know that perfectly well, and so do I, now I've seen him and this Leonie Bing and talked to them. We've been reading something into the gift that was certainly never intended."

"You've changed sides, haven't you?"

"I've changed my slant a bit, that's all."

"Oh, Tim, why? You were sorry for me before, and were sympathetic and kind. What's altered you so much?"

"Good heavens, Marion, I haven't changed my sympathies! They're still with you. The only thing is that

you'll have to give up this idea of Nanradoc House and the estate. You haven't a shadow of claim to anything except the ruined castle, and that is part of the estate and can't be separated from it unless both Jones and his sister agree to let it go. The position is quite clear. You haven't a hope of that house."

"My cousin has given his share to me. You can't get away from that. *You* showed me the whole of my claim. Now it's up to you to help me get my rights."

Timothy groaned.

"I'm a meddling fool," he said. "Honestly, when I first heard what you had to say, then went and looked at Nanradoc, I believed that Jones *was* making you his heir, not just to the ruins, but to the lot. But I'm convinced, now that I've met him, that he had no idea of the implications of what he may even have meant as a joke. In any case, there's no conveyance to you of his ownership. You haven't a hope, my dear girl. You're living in cloud-cuckoo land, so forget all about Nanradoc. That's the reason I chanced my arm and brought you here. And now I'm going to chew the fat with the Dewes."

"Tim," said Marion, "what do the Dewes get up to after midnight? Last night they were throwing furniture about."

Timothy stared at her.

"You must have been dreaming!" he said. "Anyway, I'm going downstairs to talk to them, so I'll mention what you say."

"I'm not dreaming! Oh, Tim, I wish we'd never come here! It's getting frightening! I wish we were back in Earls Court!"

# CHAPTER SEVEN

## Ways and Means

Timothy was disarming, the caretakers apologetic.

"What I mean, sir," said Mrs. Dewes, "Dewes and me don't have no objection to children, not as such, and nice little things I don't doubt these are. What I mean, not cheeky nor rude nor nothing. What I mean, I got nothing again 'em, not as children, I mean."

"What the wife means, sir," said Dewes, "is as she likes to keep the place like what a place as belongs to you gents and ladies of the Society did oughter be kept. But she can't do it, sir, not if youngsters is going to be permitted the in and out all over the front steps and slidin' on the polished 'all floor, sir, and scuffin' their feet on the best staircarpet."

Timothy said that he could quite understand, and had been at some pains to point these things out to Miss Jones, who, he was sure, had been thoughtless, not ill-disposed.

"The other point," he added, "is this carpentry stunt of yours, Dewes. Is it really necessary to use a hammer in the attic after the children have gone to bed? You couldn't do the work down here instead, I suppose?"

"I can't hardly put down a path o' boards to the cistern unless I'm up where the cistern *is*, sir," said Dewes, aggrieved and righteous. "Not as it's really my work, sir, as *you* well know, but done willing, to save the expense, sir."

"Do we need a path of boards to the cistern? I thought we had one."

"Fifty year old, sir, and got the woodworm something terrible."

"Well, couldn't you see to it in the daytime, then?"

"I could use me Saturday afternoons, I s'pose, but I reckons to have them orf."

"Aren't there any other afternoons when you could spare the time to do it?"

"All right, sir, I'll manage some'ow."

"Stout fellow! Kids must have their quota of sleep, you know."

"So must we," said Mrs. Dewes, with sudden asperity. "Three times 'as Dewes 'ad to rouse 'isself out of bed to find what's goin' on."

"Why, how do you mean, Mrs. Dewes?" This sounded uncomfortably like confirmation of what Marion had told him.

"Well, sir, of course, it might be rats, and then, again, it might be burglars, or, if you believes in the sperrit world, as some folks do, it might be a ghost, but to the best of our belief, Dewes and mine, sir, it's nothing more nor less than this Miss Jones a-snoopin' around the place and, what's more, throwin' the furniture about in doin' so."

"Dear, dear! That sounds a bit much. Have you anything really to go on?"

"Not to say go on, no, sir, exceptin' the noise, but we has our suspicions, and I don't think we're that far out in what we're thinkin'."

"Because you don't like Miss Jones?"

"It would be demeanin' ourself to say we do, sir, speakin' without prejudice, of course."

"Oh, of course. Prejudice would never enter into it. I'm perfectly certain of that. Why don't you lock up the rooms at night? You've got keys to all of them, haven't you? Anyway, thanks for your co-operation. I'll speak to Miss Jones. Good night."

"Good night, sir." But they seemed moody and dissatisfied.

"M.J.M.G.," said Timothy to the porter when he arrived at his club, where he intended to dine.

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

"Eh? Oh, nothing. I was thinking aloud, that's all. My room's all ready, I suppose?" Reassured, he continued to think, although not aloud, while he dressed for dinner. When he was ready, he went down to the club bar, where he encountered the president of Phisbe.

"Hullo, Tim! Staying in Town for a bit?" enquired the president. "What are you going to have?"

"These are on me," said Timothy. "I've got to soften you up."

"For goodness' sake, why?"

"I've gone and boobed a bit. You won't be pleased."

"Doesn't sound like you. Are you letting us in for doing up that ruin of yours in North Wales?"

"No, not exactly. Are you dining with anybody?"

"No. Let's share a table."

"Fine. What are you doing in Town?"

"Drove the wife to her sister's in Hampstead. They're going to some concert or other. I've opted out and have bespoken a room here for the night. The others will take her back with them, and I'm to pick her up in the morning."

"How nice and uncomplicated your life seems to be. Oh, well, anyway, cheers!"

"Cheers! Look here, let's collar those chairs over there while we have our drinks, and then you can disclose your guilty secret. After that, we can enjoy our dinner, I hope. Right. Now, fire away."

"Well," said Timothy, "I've put myself on the spot, I rather think."

"The girl?"

"What girl? Oh, you mean Marion Jones. Well, yes, in a way that's right, but not in the way you might be thinking."

"I'm glad of that. She's got three children already, hasn't she?"

"She has, indeed. At this present moment she and they are roosting at Phisbe's headquarters."

"The devil they are! What on earth does Coningsby think?"

"It isn't really Coningsby who's the trouble, although he's got his own angle on the thing. It's the Dewes I'm worried about."

"Oh, look here, Coningsby mustn't alienate the Dewes! I don't see how we could replace them."

"He isn't alienating anybody. He's almost off his rocker, poor chap, because he's been made a sort of No Man's Land. He gets sniped over by both the combatants. He's between Devil Marion and Deep Sea Dewes."

"I see what you're getting at, of course. Didn't you realise—I pass over the enormity of your offence in wishing your cast-off lodgers on to Phisbe—but didn't you realise how the respectable Dewes couple would react to the presence of Miss Jones and three little Joneses on the premises?"

"It would be all right if both parties would behave themselves, but they won't. Let me get you another drink."

"Thank you. After all, it's about the only way you can expiate your crimes. And now, tell me more. I always thought you had an original approach and an imaginative way of doing things, but this particular effort is a masterpiece. Spare me nothing! We have half an hour before we need go in to dinner. Go on, curdle my blood."

Timothy told him everything, condensing the story but omitting nothing of importance.

"So that's how it stands," he said in conclusion. "If she hadn't got those kids, the whole thing would never have started, but I seem to have set my hand to the plough, and I certainly can't back out now. My only excuse for getting mixed up in the thing was that the Earls Court set-up had to

be experienced to be believed. I intended Phisbe's third floor to be a temporary measure only, of course, but it's come apart in my hands rather soon. We can't have the Dewes upset, as you rightly point out, and poor young Coningsby complains it's ruining his work. I really don't see anything for it but to buy the family a house."

"I've had a letter from Parsons."

"Change of subject? Well, perhaps you're right."

"By no means a change of subject. Parsons has been along to have another look at your ruins."

"I know he thought, as I did, that something could be done with them, but there's this snag of Marion's wanting to live there, you see, and, although I've given her this idea that she might have a claim on the whole estate, we can hardly give her squatter's rights on it, can we? The only plan would be . . ."

"Yes, I thought of that when I re-read Parsons's letter. It would solve your problem, too."

"But, even if we could get Pembroke Jones and this sister of his to agree to sell us the ruins and the side of the hill they stand on, we'd still have to talk Marion out of giving up her claim, and that's not going to be easy."

"You say she's got nothing in writing."

"She may have had a letter from Jones by now."

"A letter wouldn't be binding as a contract, unless she'd taken up her option. We shall just have to see that she doesn't."

"Isn't that just a bit—well—indecent?"

"I don't really think so, you know. After all, how can she lose? Even if she lives long enough to inherit the estate, she'll never be able to afford to keep it up. She'll be far better off with the compensation we shall pay her—or, rather, that *you* will pay her."

"Yes, I'd worked that out, too, before I got this bee in my bonnet that Jones was pulling a fast one. If Marion was

telling the truth, all she wants is somewhere for herself and the children to live."

"You're not sure that she *was* telling the truth?"

"It's a toss-up between what *she* told me and the Leonie Bing version, between which there are certain discrepancies."

"How do you mean?"

"I don't see why Marion had to tell me that Miranda is the daughter of an actress friend of hers. Why couldn't she have said straight out that the baby is Pembroke Jones's daughter? As for the twins, well, Leonie's view is the same as that of those odious women in the Earls Court tenement. She claims that they are Marion's own children. Marion, on the other hand, tells me that they're her brother's orphans."

"Well, it's your morass, and you'll have to get yourself out of it. Meanwhile, the committee meets next Wednesday week, and after we've settled the Rieve Abbey controversy, Nanradoc will be our talking point. You'd better polish up your speeches. What about photographs and plans?"

"Coningsby can go to Nanradoc tomorrow, and I'll take on his job at headquarters while he's away. That will kill two birds with one stone. It will give the poor lad a break, and it will enable me to throw a little oil on troubled waters. I shall take a firm line with Marion Jones. She's got to behave herself, or else . . ."

"Don't play the heavy. Keep the girl sweetened. Find out what she really wants. If it *is* the estate, that's that, and we had better opt out. Another thing: what about getting the name of Pembroke Jones's lawyers and putting Burley and Burley in touch with them at once? We've got to find out what the legal position is with regard to Nanradoc before we can enter into negotiations. Will you see to it? Incidentally, there's a funny side to all this. We laid it down at the beginning that Phisbe isn't an institution for housing the homeless, and that just what you've turned us into, blight you!"



“Mea culpa,” said Timothy. On the following morning he went back to headquarters to see Coningsby. Coningsby was surprised and gratified when he learned of the assignment which had been given him.

“I’m delighted, sir,” he said. “Of course, I have acted as official photographer and cartographer before, but never quite on my own. I deeply appreciate the honour accorded me. Have you any particular instructions for me to carry out?”

“No, I don’t think so. Photograph everything in sight and from all angles. I’ve been on the phone to Mr. Parsons, and he or his wife will drive you out to Nanradoc and show you the ruins. After that, it’s up to you. Apart from the photographs, all we shall want is a sketch-plan—just a rough lay-out—showing the relation of the various bits and pieces to one another. Make two copies and give one to Mr. Parsons so that he can make his own drawings, if he wants to, but, of course, it’s the photographs we’re after. Get along home and do your packing. There’s a train at . . .”

“I have my own little car, sir. I shall enjoy the drive. May I ask when I’m expected to return? I only ask because of the weather. It looks a little like rain, and although, of course, I can photograph the castle when it’s raining, the effect will be less attractive than if I can get it in sunshine.”

“Oh, we don’t want anything depressing to show the committee. Take a week on the job if it’s necessary. Mr. Parsons is quite prepared to put you up for any length of time. He said so over the telephone.”

A rejoicing Coningsby skipped blithely down the front steps, and Timothy went off to find Mrs. Dewes. Dewes himself had a part-time job in a garage as a motor mechanic and was responsible to Phisbe only for attending to the central heating and for being on the premises at night. Mrs. Dewes was polishing the furniture in the committee room when Timothy tracked her down.

"Oh, sir!" she exclaimed, when Timothy walked in. "Would you mind keeping to the carpet? I just finished polishing them boards!"

"And very nice they look, Mrs. Dewes. But our meeting isn't until Wednesday week, you know."

"It's just that I like to keep things looking right, sir. That way you can't be caught out. Adding on to that, sir, I had to polish out *footprints*."

"Footprints? The children haven't been in here, I hope?"

"The children, no, sir. Who else, it's not for me to say, being as I can't be sure."

"I see. What sort of footprints?"

"Rubber-soled shoes as it might be tennis plimsolls, or something of that nature, sir. That's why we never heard nothing, I suppose. What's more, they wasn't there yesterday. I can be certain of that, sir, because, even if I don't put polish down every day, for which there is never no need, not *every* day, sir, I always gives a once-over with the mop, and, if the marks had been there, I'd of noticed."

"Yes, of course you would. Mr. Coningsby never wears rubber-soled shoes in the office, I suppose?"

"Mr. Coningsby wouldn't never tread on my boards, sir, no matter *what* 'e might 'ave on 'is feet. Not that 'e's ever dressed less than a gentleman, sir, as *you* knows as well as what *I* do. No, sir, it is *not* Mr. Coningsby. A nicer and quieter young gentleman never walked."

"Well, it's all a bit odd, Mrs. Dewes, I must admit. It's not as though there's anything valuable in the house, so I can't see why anybody should want to get in, except members of the Society, and they would hardly snoop about at night. Do you suspect Miss Jones of walking about at night?"

"Dewes and me might be wrong about Miss Jones, sir. She come down, as nice as nice, last evening, after you went, and said she quite understood, and would see the children used the back way in future, so I said when wet

they were welcome to use the front, it being quicker and not so puddly, and I'd put down the noospaper in the 'all to save their dirty feet, pervided they went straight through the green-baize door and always used the back stairs, to which she was quite agreeable, and thanked me."

"Compromise, thy name is England," said Timothy.  
"Well, that's fine, Mrs. Dewes. And you're sure the footprints couldn't have been those of Miss Jones?—speaking without prejudice, of course."

"Not without she wears 'erring boxes without topes, as the old song says, sir, and, actually, her feet is quite dainty."

"Well, if you can manage to find me some sort of shakedown in here for the night, I'll come back when I've finished my dinner at the club, and do a little snooping of my own. I'm taking over Mr. Coningsby's job while he's up in Wales doing photography for the next committee meeting."

"It'll be a comfort to 'ave you on the spot, sir. There's still them noises in the night."

To Timothy's surprise, the president was again in the bar when he went along there for a cocktail before dinner.

"Hullo, Tim," he said. "My wife has elected to accompany her host and hostess to the ballet tonight, so I'm off the lead again. What shall we do for kicks?"

"Go and track down the Phisbe ghost," said Timothy.  
The president grinned in dismissal of the spectre.

"My turn tonight. What will you have?" he asked.

"Dry Martini, thanks. No, I'm perfectly serious. Mrs. Dewes isn't the woman to claim that she sees footprints, unless the footprints are there, let alone hear noises in the night."

"Well, no, she wouldn't be imagining them, would she? Come across to that little table and tell me more. I thought Mrs. Dewes was convinced that your Marion Jones was the pathological snooper. Has she changed her tune?"

"Somewhat, but I don't think that's the answer. In fact, I'm so certain it isn't that I'm going to spend the night there

and find out what, if anything, is going on in that house. I'm getting some sort of shakedown in the committee room. Why don't you come and see the fun?"

"Sure I wouldn't cramp your style?"

"No, seriously, will you come? After all, you *are* the president, so, if there *is* anything funny going on, you ought to know about it."

"Well, I do know about it. You've just told me."

"*Is* there anything among the archives that someone outside the Society might want to look at, do you suppose?"

"Good heavens, no! Come on, let's have another. Same again for you? By the way," he added, when he came back with the drinks, "I suppose you haven't asked Mrs. Dewes whether they had any suspicions that anybody gate-crashed the house *before* Marion Jones arrived there? It might be worth finding out."

"Well, it wasn't until these last two days that any disturbances were mentioned by the Dewes—although, come to think of it, Marion also mentioned noises she's heard at night."

"But Mrs. Dewes has gone back on her first opinion that Miss Jones was the prowler?"

"She was impressed by the size of these footprints made by rubber-soled shoes on the polished boards."

"The size, yes. And she didn't mention footprints until this morning. Oh, well, let's dine, and I'll walk round with you, unless you've got your car."

"No, I took a taxi, but it isn't far to walk. Oh, Coningsby thought it looked a bit like rain. We wouldn't want to walk in the rain."

"No, people only sing in it. What did you tell Coningsby to do about the photographs?"

"To take them from all angles, and to make a couple of sketch-plans and give one of them to Parsons."

"I might go up there tomorrow and see how he's shaping. Your Nanradoc begins to interest me. Anyway, I'll

certainly come along with you after dinner and have a word with the Dewes, even if I don't stay the night."

# CHAPTER EIGHT

## The Poltergeist

Timothy had no expectation that the president would spend the night at the Phisbe headquarters. They arrived at soon after nine o'clock to interrupt Mrs. Dewes's television viewing and to be informed that Dewes had gone out for his evening constitutional which was, by interpretation, to the pub.

"We was wondering, sir," said Mrs. Dewes to the president, "if there would be any objection to us keeping a dog."

"A dog, Mrs. Dewes? Not such a good idea in London."

"Neither is blockings and hangings at dead of night such a good idea, sir, neither," responded Mrs. Dewes spiritedly.

"Oh, yes, I've heard something of this from Mr. Herring."

"I am not what you'd call a nervous woman, sir. Far from it. And Dewes, well, 'e was a Navy man, as you know. But this night prowler, well, 'e's beginning to get on our nerves, sir. We needs a good night's sleep, same as everyone else, and we reckon we're entitled to get it."

"Of course, of course. And, if you want to keep a dog, that's quite all right, I'm sure. You'll have to feed it, but the committee will pay for the licence. I'm sorry you've been disturbed, but don't you think it may simply be the people next door?"

"No, I don't, sir. These 'ouses is solid built. Besides, there's the footprints, sir. Next door never made those."

"Well, get the dog, by all means. Have you an animal in view?"

"Not to say in view, sir. We 'ad to get your permission first, of course. Without permission," went on Mrs. Dewes virtuously, "of course neether Dewes nor me would ever persoom . . ."

"No, no, I see, I see. Well, good night, Mrs. Dewes, and I hope you'll not be disturbed again. Mr. Herring is staying, I believe?"

"For which I am truly grateful. Thank you for coming round, sir . . . Oh, thank you *very* much, I'm sure, sir. That's very kind of you."

"My contribution towards the cost of the dog. Good night, again. Good night, Herring. Let me know how you get on."

"Which dog," said Mrs. Dewes confidentially to Timothy, when she had shown the president out, "will be on the premises tomorrow as ever is. Dewes is bespeaking 'im tonight."

She had made Timothy up a bed in the committee room. She took him upstairs to inspect it. He might have known her better, he reflected, than to have envisaged anything makeshift. It was a most respectably comfortable divan, and she and Dewes must have had some difficulty in humping it up the front stairs. She had put her best sheets and pillow cases, a couple of almost new blankets, an eiderdown, and a candlewick bedspread on it.

"Oh, really, Mrs. Dewes!" he said when, with pride, she displayed it. "I didn't mean to put you to all this trouble. A mattress on the floor was all I'd thought of."

"You could 'ave that in a common doss'ouse, sir. This used to be a gentleman's residence. I should *expect Things to Walk* if I let you sleep on the floor."

As soon as she left him, Timothy went upstairs and tapped on Marion's door. Before she opened it, she called out, (nervously, he thought), "Who's that?"

"Timothy Herring," he replied. "Can I speak to you?"

She opened the door.

"You?" she said, astonished. "What on earth are you doing here?"

"Well, these are Phisbe's premises," he protested.

"I mean, at this time of night."

"It's not, perhaps, the best time to choose for a visit, but it isn't all that late. I want to speak to you. It won't take more than five minutes."

"Then you'd better come in." She closed the door behind him and then stood with her back against it. "I did what you told me. I've placated Mrs. Dewes," she said, "but they're still being unreasonably noisy."

"Oh, in what way? I told Dewes not to do his carpentering in the attic unless he can do it in the afternoons. Has he been annoying you again?"

"It isn't his hammering. He hasn't done it at night any more. It's worse than that. He creeps around and throws the furniture about. I told you about it. I suppose he's quite right in the head?"

"What time of night was this?"

"I don't know, but I think it must have been well after midnight."

"Did the noise alarm you?"

"Well, of course it did. It isn't funny to wake up in the dark and hear somebody throwing tables and chairs about. I suppose he must have been drunk."

"That doesn't sound like Dewes." (He did not say what Mrs. Dewes had told him). "Anyway, whatever it is, there's no need to worry. I'll see to things."

"Oh, Tim!" She jumped to it quickly. "Then it *isn't* Dewes!"

"Don't look so scared."



"But, of course, I'm scared. It was bad enough before, but, if it isn't the Dewes, *who is it?*"

"I don't know, but I'm here to find out, if I can."

"Did the Dewes ask you to stay?"

"No, but Mrs. Dewes laid a similar complaint to yours. I think she thought it might be you fooling about."

"Oh, Tim, it's horrible!"

"Not now I'm on hand. Look here, you've got a key. Lock yourself in, if you feel nervous."

"I couldn't do that. I always keep my door open a crack at night, in case Miranda wakes up and wants me. That's why I heard the noises so clearly. And once or twice, as well as the noises, I've thought I heard somebody creeping about the house, but, of course, again, I only thought of the Dewes."

"You were probably right. Anyway, lock your door tonight"—he suddenly grinned—"for my sake, if not for your own!"

She smiled and came away from the door.

"All right," she said, "I will. After all, it's months now since Miranda woke up and called out for me in the night."

"Fine. Good night, then, Marion. And don't worry any more. I'll soon sort this prowler out. It's only some poor devil who's found somewhere to doss down for the night, I expect. Mrs. Dewes will have to turn the key of the back door as soon as the children and you are in from school. That will do the trick, and keep him out."

He left her, and stood on the landing until he heard her turn the key. Then he went down to the committee room, where he had left the light on, closed the door, and looked into the built-in cupboards. Then he went out again, having turned off the light. He locked the door and pocketed the key, then he went down to the ground-floor. Dewes had returned, and he and his wife, each with tumbler in hand, were watching television.

“Oh, don’t bother to switch it off,” he said, as Dewes got up. “I only came down to tell you that Miss Jones also heard furniture being overturned, and isn’t feeling very happy about it.”

Dewes, who had turned off the television, brought out another tumbler.

“It’s only beer, sir,” he said, “without you’d prefer some stout.”

“Beer, please. Thanks very much. Well, here’s to our visitor! I’m curious to know what he’s like.”

“I’ll rough him up if I catch him,” said Dewes. “Like me to stay on watch with you, would you, sir? Glad to sit up, if wanted.”

“No, don’t bother. I’ll yell blue murder if I need any help.” He left them at eleven and went up to the committee room. If there was a prowler—and the experiences of Marion and the Dewes did not seem to leave this in doubt—the obvious reason for his presence could hardly have been that which Timothy had suggested. The dead-beats and the down-and-outs do not break into pretentious houses in search of a bed. Either the caller was a lunatic or a criminal. Of these, the former seemed the more likely. The last thing a criminal would do was to make his presence known by throwing furniture about. Nevertheless, Timothy looked round the committee room to assure himself that there was nothing in it which was worth stealing.

There was a good long-case clock, by Joseph and John Knibb, made in the last quarter of the seventeenth century; there was a large eighteenth-century mahogany break-front bookcase; the president’s chair was in walnut and dated from some time after 1675 but still in the reign of Charles II; the table at which the committee sat was of oak and had been made in the seventeenth century. The only other object of interest was a mirror-frame over the fireplace. It was attributed to Grinling Gibbons, but, although a charming piece, it was more likely, Timothy thought, to have

been carved by one of his contemporaries, apprentices, or imitators than by the master himself.

"Trouble is," said Timothy aloud, "you'd need a furniture van to shift this lot." He went into the great salon where parties and annual general meetings were held, but the same objection was in force, except that in this room there was a very impressive mahogany and satinwood bookcase, glass-fronted above and with three stout drawers and sturdy cupboards beneath. It was the gift of a friendly American honorary member and had been shipped across from Baltimore. In the glass-fronted top the Society kept on display some of their more easily portable treasures.

There was the ivory diptych, fourteenth-century French, with its carvings of the Nativity and the visit of the Magi; there was the early fifteenth-century psalter bound, later in the same century, by the Fleming, Jacques or, as he preferred to spell it, *Jaques* Goutier; there was a fifteenth-century German drinking-horn mounted in silver-gilt, and a silver-gilt chalice of about the year 1300; there was a crozier-head of uncertain date but probably to be assigned to the second half of the fourteenth century; there was a copper-gilt pax of roughly the same time, and another, in silver-gilt, Flemish, dating from a hundred years later.

"Those could make a haul, I suppose," thought Timothy, "but only by a collector. The ordinary sneak-thief wouldn't look at them." He left the door of the salon wide open, put a couple of the committee's chairs across the open doorway of the committee room, and went to bed there, but only to the extent of removing his jacket, tie, and shoes. He had changed out of his evening clothes at the club and had come round to the Society's headquarters wearing an open-necked sports shirt, flannel trousers, and a tweed jacket.

He was not a heavy sleeper and, trusting that any unusual noise would wake him, he soon dropped off and was dreaming that an air-raid had just begun when he woke with the realisation that what he had heard was certainly a crash,

and a crash that had taken place near at hand. Somebody had knocked over the two chairs which he had placed in a strategic position, one balanced on top of the other, across the committee-room doorway.

He slipped back the light bed-coverings and lowered his feet to the floor. Then, realising too late that he was a long way from the electric-light switch and would have done well to have brought a torch with him, he groped his way to the door, found the switch, and flooded the room with brilliant light.

He was too late. The only sign the intruder had left was the overturned barrier formed by the two chairs. He put them out of the way and made for the top of the stairs, only to meet Dewes.

"They're about again, sir," said Dewes. "I take it you never saw no one?"

"Not a sausage!" said Timothy, with chagrin. "I ought to have brought a torch."

"Well, I didn't meet nobody on my way up, sir, so there's only one way they could of gorn." He pointed to the next flight of stairs.

"Stay here, then, while I put on some shoes," said Timothy, who had the usual human objection to going about in stockinged feet if there were marauders on the premises. When he re-joined Dewes he took the lead up the stairs, switching on the landing lights as he went. On the top floor he almost cannoned into Marion, who switched on the light just as he reached for it.

"Is anything the matter?" she asked. "I heard a crash."

"Yes, so did we. No use to ask whether anybody came up here, I suppose?"

"I haven't seen anyone, but I've only just come out of my room. Somebody could have slipped up to the attic, I suppose."

"Stay here," said Timothy. "I'm going to have a look at your room."

"Oh, but, really . . ."

"Best do as he says, miss," said Dewes. "It'll satisfy everybody, that way."

Timothy soon came back to them.

"I'll just take a peep at the kids," he said. "You didn't go into their room, Marion, did you?"

"Oh, no. The noise came from somewhere downstairs."

"We know where it came from." He opened the door of the room where the children were sleeping, switched on the light, tip-toed across to the built-in wardrobe, and opened it, looked under the two-tiered bunk where the twins were sleeping, and then returned to the doorway, switched off the light, and, without a word to the others, went into the third room, which Marion used as a dining-and-living-room. He subjected it to the same close inspection.

"Looks like the attic, sir," said Dewes. "Think he might be armed?"

"Go into the children's room and lock the door," said Timothy to Marion. "You'd better be with them in case there's a noise and they get frightened."

"But, Tim . . ."

"Do as you're told."

"Please be careful, then."

"Of course." He turned to Dewes. "Nip downstairs and get hold of the coal-hammer or something, just in case." He cocked an authoritative eyebrow at Marion and waited until he heard the click of the key on the other side of the children's bedroom door, then he mounted the narrow stairs which led up to the attic. A slight sound ahead of him indicated, he thought, the presence of the quarry. There was a light-switch at the turn of the staircase. He touched it and then stood still and looked up at the head of the stair. The door to the attic was wide open, but he could see nobody. He said, raising his voice a little above his ordinary speaking-tones,

"Come on out of there!" There was no response to this invitation. The open door made the unwelcome suggestion that there might be someone behind it. Timothy, with memories of gangster films, was in no mind to be coshed with a sandbag or the butt of a revolver or a piece of lead piping, still less to be slashed across the face with a broken bottle, so he stayed where he was and listened intently. Nothing stirred, ahead of him. Behind him he heard Dewes coming up the stairs.

At least, he was so sure it was Dewes that he did not so much as turn his head. The blow was quite a heavy one. He fell sprawled across the landing. Dewes, who had had some difficulty downstairs in finding what he conceived to be a suitable weapon, found him sitting up groggily, some three minutes later, holding on to the banisters which guarded the landing from the well of the staircase and trying to work out what had happened.

"Lor, sir!" said Dewes. "What's all this?" Timothy's head throbbed but his brain cleared.

"Dashed if I know. Someone came up behind me. I thought it was you."

"We did ought to 'ave looked in the glory-'ole, sir. That's what we oughter 'ave done."

"The glory-hole? What's that?"

"Why, the little cupboard place at the bend of the stairs between the first and the second landin'. It's where my missus keeps 'er upstairs cleanin' things. It's painted white, like the wall, and it lays flush with the wall, too, and 'asn't got no 'andle, so you'd 'ardly notice it if you didn't know it was there. That's where 'e would 'ave laid 'id. I'd like to bet on it."

"But, if you knew it was there, why on earth didn't you look into it, man?"

"Because, sir, you led and I followed, as in bounden dooty to do."

“Well, the chap’s in the attic now, all right, and I’m hanged if I want another clump on the head.”

“If ‘e’s in the attic, ‘e’s treed, sir, and we know where ‘e is when we wants ‘im. My idea would be, sir, to both of us goin’ downstairs, where I will lay in wait on the front-door landin’ with me ‘atchet as I found in the woodshed—which, bein’ in London, is a part of the wine-cellar, sir—while you goes along to Mrs. Dewes and gets ‘er to look at your ‘ead. Then me lord up there can please ‘isself what ‘e does. ‘E can stay put, and wait for the police when we telephone ‘em, or ‘e can come downstairs and give ‘isself up to me and my ‘atchet.”

“Sounds a reasonable plan,” said Timothy, tenderly touching his scalp, “but suppose there are two of them?”

“That might be awk’ard, sir, that might. Ah, / know! There’s a door at the foot of these ‘ere attic stairs. There ain’t no lock and key, but there’s a ruddy great iron latch as ketches into two slots on the outside of the doorway. There’s a iron ladder and a trapdoor. You can get out on to a flat roof and escape to the end ‘ouse in the street if you’ve a mind to but that’s all as you can do.”

“Then ten to one, that’s what our bird will have done!”

“Very likely, sir, but we’ve got ‘im cold, all the same. ‘E couldn’t get down again without ‘e went down somebody else’s trapdoor and through somebody else’s ‘ouse, and I shouldn’t ‘ardly think ‘e’d ‘ave the nerve to do that.”

“A desperate man might risk it. Anyway, yours seems the only plan, and I’m going to phone the police.” On the way downstairs he stopped at the door of the children’s room and, putting his lips to the crack of the door, he said quietly, “Marion, mind you stay where you are, and keep the door locked. There’s a dangerous man in the house.” There was no reply. He repeated the message, this time by way of the keyhole. Then he realised that there was no key blocking the hole on the other side.

# CHAPTER NINE

## Marion in Shadow

Timothy straightened up.

"That's funny," he said. He turned to Dewes, who, hatchet in hand, was waiting at the top of the stairs.

"Gone to sleep, p'raps, sir."

"I hardly think so." Timothy put his lips to the empty keyhole again. "Marion, answer me! Are you there?" A small, scared voice replied,

"There's only us."

"Bryn," said Timothy, urgently, "do you think you could get out of bed and put the light on?"

"I can reach it from here. It's a bed-light."

"Right. Switch it on, old chap, and see whether you can find the door-key. Is Bron there?"

"Yes, she's awake. She's on the lower bunk."

"What about Miranda?"

"She's asleep in her cot."

"I suppose Aunt Marion isn't with you?"

"No, she never is . . . not at night."

"Right. What about the key?"

"Yes, I can see it. It's on the floor by the door. Do you want it?"

"No, it's all right. We just thought it was lost. Leave it just where it is, and put out the light and go to sleep again. Good night, old chap."

"Good night. Why did you want the key?"



"We didn't. We just wanted to make sure it wasn't lost. Night-night." He walked to the foot of the attic stair and jerked his head towards Dewes, wincing with the sudden sharp pain which cut like a whip-lash across the duller throbbing of his injured scalp, and said,

"So now we know." He spoke grimly. He mounted the narrow flight. "What on earth does she think she's playing at?" When he reached the top landing, with Dewes behind him, he said loudly, "Come on out, Marion. You're frightening the children with this nonsense!"

There was a sound below them. Both men swung round. At the foot of the stair stood Marion.

"What are you talking about?" she asked.

"Stay where you are," said Timothy. He leapt down the stairs and grasped her wrist. "Look here, what the devil are you up to?"

"I'm not up to anything. Oh, Tim, I know who it is! I saw him!"

"When? Bar this door, Dewes."

"Very good, sir. This is all of a rum go, this is."

"You're right. Come on, Marion. You've got some explaining to do." He retained his grip. "I hope you won't get cold."

"No," she said. "Where are you taking me?"

"Down to the basement. I've no doubt Dewes will allow us the use of his sitting-room for half an hour or so."

"A pleasure, sir. If that feller's in the attic, he's treed. But I can't see how Miss Jones—"

"Yes. I should think you could go to bed now." He took Marion into the basement sitting-room, put her into a chair, removed his jacket, and spread it over her knees.

"I tell you," she said, pushing it on to the floor, "I know who it is."

"So do I," said Timothy, grimly. "Now what's the game? Why do you roam the house at night, and why did you hit me on the head and knock me out?"

“Honestly, Tim, I don’t know what you’re talking about! Hit you on the head and knock you out? I haven’t done anything of the sort!”

Timothy drew up a chair and seated himself so that he was between her and the door. “Look, Marion, don’t be silly,” he said. “Let’s have the story—and you’d better make it as convincing as you can.”

“If you’ve made up your mind, nothing I say is going to sound convincing. It’s you who’s being silly, not me. I’ll tell you all I know. It will be the truth.”

“I’ll try very hard to believe you.”

“All right, then. But is your head very bad?”

“I’ll survive. What made you do it?”

“Do you mind telling me exactly what I’m supposed to have done?”

“As though you don’t know! You know even better than I do!”

“Please, Tim! After all, the prisoner at the bar is allowed to make his defence.”

“Go right ahead. I’m all attention.”

“I can’t go ahead until I know what the charges are.”

“I was standing on the top landing outside the doorway to the attic. *Somebody*—naming no names at the moment—came up behind me and sloshed me over the head with a so-called blunt instrument. I don’t know how long I was out, but I imagine it was long enough for my assailant to make a getaway. I *thought* he, she, or it had stepped over me and gone past into the attic, but my ideas have changed.” His face changed, too. He grinned at her. “All I ask is the reason for this unnecessary assault upon my person.”

“I suppose the man you won’t let me name wanted to get into the attic. I don’t know why. I only know it wasn’t I who hit you. I didn’t even see it happen.”

“Prove that you didn’t hit me! Go on. I’m listening, as they say in the gangster films.”

"I'm not sure that I've got any proof. Oh, wait a minute! Whereabouts on the head were you struck?"

"On the back of the cranium, and, if it's of any interest to you, it hurts."

"How near the attic door were you?—Or how near the top of the stairs?"

Timothy stared at her.

"I was right at the top of the stairs," he said. "I didn't go near the attic door because it was open, and I thought our poltergeist might be lurking, so I decided to wait for Dewes, so that if I was coshed he'd still be on his feet and would be armed."

"That means, then, that whoever hit you must have been standing on the second stair from the top. Well—may I stand up, and will you stand up, too?"

"No need," said Timothy. "I'm six foot one. You're . . . ?"

"Five feet six and three-quarters."

Timothy was thoughtful.

"I see what you mean, of course," he said, "and I may have been jumping to conclusions. Anyway, tell me the rest. I take it you disobeyed my orders to stay with the children."

"I don't take those sort of orders. Besides, if they'd been awake, they'd have wondered what on earth I was doing in their room. I slipped out again quickly, locked the door on the outside, and pushed the key underneath so that they could get out if there was an alarm—fire, or gas or something—and I went into my own room and left the door open a crack so that I could see what went on. I heard you tell Dewes to go down for a weapon and then *he* came out of that cupboard place where Mrs. Dewes keeps her cleaning things, and I recognised him. It was that awful Father from Nanradoc. He went creeping up the attic stairs, and I got right away from my door and hid behind the foot of the bed."

"Why on earth didn't you yell out? Then he wouldn't have coshed me, because I would have swung round and

seen him coming up behind me, and I could have nabbed him, once and for all."

"I'm sorry. I was too petrified to do anything."

"Even to scream?"

"I'm sorry."

"Oh, well, if your story is correct, we've got him anyway. I'll see you to your room and then I'm going to call the police. No doubt they'll soon settle his hash."

"Don't call the police, Tim! We don't want to make a lot of fuss."

"Don't be silly! This is no time to turn sentimental. I don't know what he was up to in this house, but I do know that I'm not going to be soft-hearted about blighters who hit me over the head. Come on. Up we go."

"But, Tim . . ."

"No arguments." He crossed over and took her by the sleeve. "Upstairs!"

"I can't! I'd be terrified, knowing that he was somewhere in the house."

"Nonsense! Lock yourself in."

"All right, then. But you needn't come up. You say he can't come down?"

"Not further than the door to the attic stairs. But of course I'm coming up with you. You'll need somebody to look under the bed and in the wardrobe to make certain there's nobody lurking."

"Oh, Tim, I won't! Really, do believe me, I'll be perfectly all right. *Please* don't come upstairs!"

Timothy retained his grip on her dressing-gown sleeve.

"Methinks the lady doth protest too much," he said lightly. "You're behaving very oddly, you know, my dear girl. Let's find what it's all about." He let her go so suddenly that, because she was struggling with him, she lost her balance and staggered almost the width of the room. Before she could recover, he had leapt to the door and was half-way up the first flight of stairs. She darted after him, but

had no hope of catching him. He had a start of her, and his long legs took the stairs in a series of bounds which she could not match. When she flung herself, gasping and out of breath, in at her bedroom door, Timothy already had the light on and was gazing with great interest at a long, heavy poker which was lying across the coverlet of the bed.

She stood rigid. Timothy looked at her and then down again at the poker.

"This is the thing, and a very pretty thing," he said sardonically. "And who is the owner of this very pretty thing?"

She stepped forward to pick it up, but Timothy spread his arms wide to prevent her.

"Tim!" she said, "I've never seen it before. I just wished I'd had one when I first heard the noises, but I didn't hit you, really, really I didn't!"

"No? Well, I don't think we'll let you touch it, anyway. The police are always interested in fingerprints, I believe."

"I've *said* I've never handled it! You *do* think I hit you, though, don't you?"

"It's not very easy to think anything else, is it? Look here, I'm going to take this poker away with me and you're going to bed (I hope), and in the morning you're going to tell me all about it. You'll have . . ." he glanced at his wrist-watch . . . "three or four hours to cook up a convincing story. It's not fair to expect you to be clever at this time of night."

"You're cruel, aren't you?" she said. Timothy cocked an eye at her.

"I don't know that I call it exactly *kind* to crack people over the head with heavy iron pokers," he replied. "Good night." Dewes, who had not accepted the suggestion that he was no longer required, met him at the door of the committee room.

"'Allo, 'allo!" he said, seeing the poker, held by the tip, in Timothy's fingers. "The lethal weapon, eh, sir?"

"Looks like it," said Timothy. "He must have chucked it down after he'd hit me with it."

"Funny I never saw it when I found you a-lyin' welterin' there, 'alf-way acorst the attic landing, sir. 'E must of took it with 'im, but, if so . . ."

"Oh, he'd tossed it into one of the rooms. Miss Jones's room, as a matter of fact," said Timothy shortly.

" 'Ad 'e now? Well, fancy that! Makes you think, sir!"

"All right, all right!" said Timothy, irritated. "I'm just as much in the dark about it as you are. He must have had time, between knocking me out and your coming up with your hatchet and finding me lying there, to get rid of the thing on to Miss Jones before he made off for the attic."

"Could be, I suppose, sir." He eyed the poker as dubiously as though he suspected that it might be Moses's rod and, as such, liable to turn into a serpent at any minute. "Seems a bit funny, though, don't it?"

"It's not important at the moment," said Timothy, aware that Dewes was anything but stupid. "The main thing is that Miss Jones claims she saw a man come out of that brooms-and-brushes cupboard you mentioned. She did not stay put in the children's room. Quite natural, of course. There was nowhere there where she could sleep."

"Folks, especially ladies, don't usually worry about sleep when there's desperate men in the 'ouse, sir."

"That's as may be. Anyway, I'm hanging on to this poker. It may or may not have been the blunt instrument with which I was coshed. I'm saving it up for the police."

"You've phoned 'em, then?"

"No. I'll do it in the morning. They may upset and disturb the children if I send for them now."

"Just as you say, sir." Dewes's tone conveyed a rebuke, just as his attitude conveyed an utter disbelief in Timothy's explanation.

"Good night," said Timothy brusquely. "I shouldn't think we'd be disturbed again." He returned to bed, but did not

sleep for a time. He lay awake trying to puzzle out what Marion had been trying to do. Failing to reach a conclusion, he did fall asleep at last, and was wakened at nine by Mrs. Dewes, who had brought him a cup of tea. She also brought news.

"Miss Jones and the children is leaving, sir."

Timothy sat up.

"Leaving? When?"

"Now, sir. She's just telephoned the school to say she won't be in, and she's packin' all their things, sir."

"Did she give any reason?"

"She said she's caused enough trouble. P'raps, as you got 'er in, sir, you might care to 'ave a word afore she leaves."

"I most certainly would!" He drank his tea, put on his shoes and jacket, ran a hand over his hair, and mounted the stairs. The doors on the third floor were open. The twins were squabbling, little Miranda was howling, and, in the midst of the tumult, Marion was feverishly packing clothes into suitcases. "And what the devil," said Timothy, going in and standing beside her, "do you think you're up to now?"

She gave him a glance, and went on with what she was doing. After what had gone on in the early hours, Timothy was in no mood for being ignored. He pulled her round so that she faced him. "I asked you a question," he said.

"We're leaving, that's all."

"Yes, I see that. Where are you going?"

"Does it matter?"

"Well, it matters to the kids, I should think."

"That's no concern of yours. They'll be all right."

"Just as you say. Look here, if it's the police you're afraid of, I don't intend to do anything about that poker. I'll wipe it clean and put it back where it belongs, so, if that's what's worrying you, forget it."

"But *you* won't forget it, will you? You still believe I hit you with it."

"Well, so you did, didn't you? Go on. Admit it. Call it panic, call it what you like, but admit you did it."

"All right," she said. "Have it your own way. And now please let me get on. I'm in a hurry."

"At least tell me where you're going."

"I suppose I owe you that much. I'm going to my cousin's."

"What, to Pembroke Pritchard Jones? Does he know?"

"Of course not. I'm not a fool."

"That's just exactly what you are—and a prize-winning, super-blind, fat-headed little fool at that. He'll sling you out, double quick, and, if *he* doesn't, his wife will. Don't be such a juggins. That couple would see you and the kids dead in a ditch before they'd have you messing up their domestic arrangements. They're artists—and, like all artists, ruthless."

"Well, after what's happened, and knowing what you think of me, I couldn't possibly stay here."

This sign of her weakening encouraged Timothy. He said,

"Look here, then, I'll tell you what. You leave the children here today and buzz off to Pembroke Jones and find out what he's prepared to do. I'll see that the youngsters are properly looked after and fed. You'll manage much better on your own, and may be able to get some useful dope about Nanradoc if you're not cluttered up with the kids. Get along to Mold and talk turkey to your cousin, and get the Nanradoc situation straightened out, if you can. How would that be, eh?"

She turned away her head and did not answer. He knew she was crying. He went down to the basement and asked Mrs. Dewes for some breakfast. Then he said,

"If I put in today and another night here, Mrs. Dewes, could you help me look after the children? They won't be going to school today, and I've advised Miss Jones to go off on her own, without them. She wants to find out whether a



cousin of hers will be good enough to give them a home. I think last night's little party has scared her, and, really, I suppose it's just as well that she and the children should go."

"Very good, sir," said Mrs. Dewes. "Without," she added, not looking directly at him, "you'd care to think of taking 'em off to the Zoo for the day. The Zoo is very nice, the Zoo is. I often wish I 'ad more time to go there myself. I 'ad an uncle used to be in the elephant 'ouse. Many and many's the time us children used to go and see 'im in the old days, and get a free ride on an elephant."

"Would *you* take the children, then?" Timothy pulled out his notecase. "Here, treat yourselves to anything you'd like, and don't bother about buses and things. I'll ring up right away for a taxi, and mind you come home in one, too."

"Well, really, sir, I don't know, with Dewes bein' out all day, whether I'd ought to leave the 'ouse. Not as I wouldn't like to go. I loves to take kiddies to the Zoo."

"That's all right, then. I shall be here, except just to pop out for lunch. Enjoy yourselves, and stay as long as you like."

With everyone out of the house, he reflected happily, he could have the rest of the day to make a thorough search. There would be nobody to get in his way, engage him in conversation, or seek to interpret his actions. Somebody had most certainly been in search of something, although what the house held of sufficient importance to warrant anyone creeping about in it at night, overturning furniture and, crowning irrelevance (he grinned to himself at the unintentional pun), hitting him over the head with a heavy poker, he could not imagine. Marion must have wanted something very badly, and must have been pretty certain that it was on Phisbe's premises, to have been prepared to ransack the place in the dead of night, he thought. Somehow, it hardly fitted in with what he felt he knew of her, and of course, her story about the poker might be true.

What he could not swallow was her assertion that she had seen the Nanradoc monk. That was either the result of fevered imaginings or else it was a downright lie. He wondered that she had not added Pembroke Jones and the trousered woman for good measure.

# CHAPTER TEN

## Blackbird on a Roof

Timothy drove Marion to the station, bought her a return ticket to Chester, and told her that she might have to hire a car from there to take her to Pembroke's studio. He offered her five pounds, which, with an awkward expression of thanks, she accepted. It was almost the only conversation which passed between their leaving Phisbe's headquarters and the train leaving the London station.

Full of doubts and suspicions, including an impression that he might have seen the last of Marion and was left holding, so to speak, three babies, he returned to Phisbe and, before he re-entered the house, he parked the car and then walked along on the side of the street opposite the house, closely scanning the roofs, but these were flat, with four-foot-high parapets, after the fashion of the time in which they had been built, so, what with this, and the prevalence of chimney-tops, he had little hope of spotting whether his marauder (if it had not been Marion) had attempted to escape from the attic that way.

He saw nobody up there, so he entered the house and began a diligent search, having first ascertained that the staircase door to the attic was still secure. His object was to find out, if he could, (and if the marauder had not already stolen it), what the object of the night prowler could have been. That it was simple burglary he did not for one

moment believe. The noise which the intruder had made, not on one night only, indicated a clumsy, amateur hand.

That Marion seemed to have been mixed up in the affair pointed to a connection with the Nanradoc estate and, to add to this impression, there was her contention that she had seen the intruder and that it was Father Ignatius.

Whoever it was, his or her objective had been the committee room, and Timothy subjected this to the most exhaustive search, taking out and opening books and folders, exploring the members' cupboards, his own and the president's archives, Coningsby's table drawers, and so on and so forth, without coming upon anything which could serve to explain anything except the members' own interests and the work of the Society as a whole.

He did the same for the salon, and then searched the rooms which had been given over to Marion and the children. He was baffled largely by the fact that, unless it was something to do with Nanradoc, he had not the remotest idea of what he sought. By half-past twelve he was heartily sick of his task. He washed his hands in Coningsby's little cubby-hole next-door to the office in the basement and decided that he had been wasting his time. His head still ached from the blow he had received and he felt thoroughly disgruntled and dissatisfied. There was a mystery, but its solution seemed as far off as ever.

He lunched at his club, fobbed off an invitation to play golf and another to accompany an acquaintance to Lord's, and was back at Phisbe's headquarters by a quarter-past two. Then he remembered that, before Mrs. Dewes and the children had gone off to the Zoo, she had mentioned that the post had come and that she had put the letters on Mr. Coningsby's desk, as usual, "being as I suppose you may like to look at 'em, sir." He decided that, as he had promised Coningsby to do his job while the dogsbody was in North Wales, he had better deal with the correspondence before he went on with his search of the house.

He was about half-way through the small pile of letters which he found on the desk when the telephone rang.

"Mr. Herring?"

"Speaking."

"Police here, sir. We were called up to bring down a party from a roof four doors away from yours. We're holding him, as he can give no satisfactory explanation as to why he was up there, but he says you can identify him, and that he got trapped on your roof by accident, and made his way across the other roofs, hoping to find a way down, but could not."

"Oh, yes? What's he like?"

"Well, I'll admit he seems to be a respectable party, sir. He is dressed as belonging to a religious Order, and seems quiet and well-spoken enough and hasn't given any trouble. Acts a bit dazed-like and says he didn't mean any harm. Could we suggest you come round, sir? Carlyle Street police station."

"All right. I'll be along as soon as I can." He did not intend to go until he had made up his mind what attitude he was going to take. A complaint that the monk had broken into Phisbe with intent to steal and, to avoid capture, had struck Timothy on the head and laid him out, might or might not be a wise move. True, he had the lump on his head with which to substantiate his story, but to prove that the blow had been delivered by a quiet, well-spoken person in monkish dress might be impossible. There were no witnesses to the assault, but only to the result of it.

There remained the inevitability of abasing himself before Marion. He had not believed a word of her story, particularly when he had found the iron poker on her bed, yet here, apparently, was the confirmation of what she had said. She had claimed that she had seen Father Ignatius in the house, and here he was, having been trapped on a roof which could be reached very easily from the attics.

“If only she hadn’t lied about Miranda’s parentage and about having a letter from Jones,” he thought, “I’d believe her out of hand, but did she know, anyway, that Ignatius was in the house? Did she, in fact, let him in? Anyway, I’d better apologise.”

He opened another of the letters which lay on Coningsby’s desk. It was from that omniscient but modest young man himself. The weather, it indicated, had been perfect, so far, and he expected the pictures of Nanradoc to be excellent. He had called at the house to ask permission to photograph the ruins, but had found nobody at home, so had left a note. He hoped that all this was in order. He expected to be back in London by the end of the week, if not before.

There seemed no point in filing the letter, so Timothy tossed it into the waste-paper basket and took the next from the pile. It was as he slit open the envelope that a thought struck him. Coningsby’s files were in the office, not in the committee room. Either the intruder was not aware of this, or else, having discovered that the Dewes couple slept in the basement, he had not had sufficient nerve to tackle the office, which was also on the basement floor. Timothy took Coningsby’s keys out of the drawer in the desk and went over to the filing cabinet.

Coningsby was a most methodical person. One of the drawers was labelled, in Coningsby’s beautiful script: *For consideration by Mr. Herring*. One’s own name in print or in someone else’s writing exercises a certain fascination. Timothy unlocked the drawer and pulled it out. Inside it, tied neatly with the repellent pink ligature known officially as red tape, was a small bundle of letters and papers. Timothy carried it over to the desk, untied the tape, and spread out its contents. Most of these he had seen before and they had been provided by Coningsby with neatly-gummed slips on which he had recorded Timothy’s comments, but there was one marked *Personal* which had arrived on the morning of

Coningsby's departure for Nanradoc and which he had concluded, no doubt, that Timothy would study while he was in temporary charge of the office. It was from Pembroke Pritchard Jones. It read:

My dear Herring,

Will try to persuade my sister to agree to sale of Nanradoc Castle, Nanradoc House and the estate, for the nominal sum of four thousand five hundred pounds. An early acceptance advised if you want to buy the freehold, as, if not, shall put it on the market to be sold at auction. My lawyers are Simms, Simms, Copperstones and Simms of Bowery Court, Long Acre, W.C.2, whom you should contact. They will prove my title (together with my sister's, of course) and meet your lawyers if you decide to purchase. Should like to help poor little Marion, and you seem interested in her.

Timothy marked the letter: *To be referred to Committee*, with a mental note that if Pembroke Pritchard Jones thought that he was so sentimentally interested in Marion that he was going to bend over backwards to obtain an option on Nanradoc for her, he would be well advised to think again. He snorted and put the letter back with the rest of the file and turned to such other items of the morning's post as he had not had time, so far, to read.

There was nothing more of any particular interest, so he shovelled the lot into the top drawer of the desk, took up his hat, and drove himself to the police station. The station sergeant was large and spoke in a mournful voice.

"I formed the impression that the gentleman is a respectable person, sir," he said, "but in view of him being on a roof and us having to get him down with the help of a fireman's ladder, the occupants naturally being unwilling to

let him down through the house, we thought it as well to find out what he thought he was up to, his account of his movements being unconvincing. This way, sir."

Father Ignatius was seated on a wooden chair at a deal table and was telling his beads. He seemed lost to the world, but when the sergeant touched his shoulder he started, dropped the necklace, sprang up, and, having first made his Eastern bow, he embraced Timothy before this could be side-stepped or in any way prevented, then took his arm and beamed at him.

"Oh, Mr. Herring!" he said. "How simply splendid of you to have come!"

Timothy put his hat on the table and tenderly caressed his skull.

"Yes, on the whole, I agree," he said. "What, exactly, did you think you were up to?"

"Oh, but nothing! Nothing at all! Perhaps it was rather naughty of me to come to London by myself. Dear Olwen was very much against it, but I'm afraid I overruled her. She wanted to see the deeds, you know. She thought her interests ought to be protected, and so, of course, I felt that there was nothing else for it but to come and get them for her."

"The deeds?"

"Of Nanradoc. She took it into her head that her brother would have deposited them with you."

"Well, he most certainly did nothing of the kind. Why should he? The deeds of Nanradoc are nothing to do with us."

"Oh, but Miss Marion Jones is your client, isn't she?"

"I should hardly call her that. We are not lawyers."

"You recognise this gentleman, then, sir?" asked the station sergeant. "You don't want to proceed? He admits to having been on your premises, presumably without your leave."



"I don't see anything to proceed about, sergeant, unless anybody else has complained."

"No complaints, sir. Somebody spotted him on the roof waving his arms about and behaving, they thought, eccentric, and were afraid he might be in danger, so they phoned us."

"That was awfully kind of them," said the monk, in sincere tones. "Don't you think that was a very kind thought, Mr. Herring?"

"Yes, if you care to be taken for a lunatic," said Timothy, shortly. "But we're wasting the sergeant's time." When they were out on the pavement he added, "Why did you hit me on the head last night?"

"I hit you on the head? My dear sir, whatever do you mean?"

As there was no doubt that he was going to deny having launched the assault, and as Timothy had no way of proving it against him—indeed, there was still some reason to suppose that it might have been Marion who had made the attack—Timothy said,

"Somebody hit me on the head while we were hunting you. The inference is that the somebody was yourself."

"Oh, my dear Mr. Herring, you cannot really believe that! My cloth alone . . ." he demonstrated his black draperies.

"All right," said Timothy. "Anyway, tell me how you managed to get into the house."

"I had an arrangement with Marion Jones."

"Oh, come now!"

"I assure you. I came in with her. She also has an interest in the Nanradoc deeds, as you know."

"You mean to tell me that you came in with Miss Jones?" Timothy found this statement incredible. "Oh, you can't get away with that!"

"We have been in correspondence with her ever since you brought her to Nanradoc."

“But how could you? I mean, you didn’t know her address.”

“Oh, she wrote first,” said the monk. “About living in Nanradoc House, you know. She is very anxious to make her home with us. The children are the stumbling-block, of course. We could not undertake to have three children in the house. I came here, for one thing, to tell her so, and discuss what was best to be done—about that, and about having a look at the deeds, you know.”

“I imagine you saw her leaving the house this morning,” said Timothy, after a silence during which they had halted in front of Phisbe’s headquarters. “Where did you suppose she was going?”

“My dear sir, I did not suppose anything. Why should I? I knew she was here, of course. She wrote to us saying that she had changed her address and had come to live with you.” He contrived to give these words a connubial ring. Timothy took him up sharply.

“Nonsense!” he said. “My Society has given her temporary occupation of the only floor of this house which happens not to be otherwise in use. I don’t live here. We have resident caretakers, a man and his wife, as I’m quite sure you know. You must have heard the man helping me to search the rooms last night. Now, about the title-deeds of Nanradoc. I have had a letter from Pembroke Prichard Jones. He seems to have been thinking things over, and has offered the house and estate to my Society for the sum of four thousand five hundred pounds. I have no doubt that he will communicate this offer to his sister. I cannot say, until I have placed it before my committee, of course, whether the Society will accept it.”

“Oh, dear, dear, dear! Oh, no, no, no. We could not agree to sell, particularly at such a fantastically low figure. Mr. Jones must be out of his mind to think of such a thing!” protested the monk.

"I think Miss Jones—*your* Miss Jones—is the person to decide upon that," said Timothy. "How do you come into the affair?"

"Oh, not at all, not at all, except that dear Olwen is in the habit of taking my advice, and I could not—no, I really could not, for my conscience sake—suggest she should accept such an offer. In any case, one thing would have to be clearly understood and agreed on."

"Oh, really? What would that be?"

"That we must be allowed to remain at Nanradoc—with Miss Jones—Miss Marion Jones—of course."

"My Society would never agree to such a proviso."

"Then I am afraid the deal is off."

"That is hardly for you to say. The matter concerns Mr. Pembroke Pritchard Jones . . ."

"And his sister. Nothing can be arranged without her consent."

"I am well aware of that. You appear to think that my Society is anxious to acquire this property. It may save time and avoid disappointment if I tell you that it is most unlikely that Phisbe will show any interest in the matter at all. If all sorts of strings are to be attached to the sale, I am quite sure we shall not."

"Well, Mr. Herring, we must wait and see, but, in any case, the price suggested by Mr. Pembroke Jones is quite unrealistic, so that will probably be the end of the matter. And now, since you have so kindly released me from the hands of the police, I shall be glad to make my way home."

"Right, but, before you go, as I seem to have got you out of a pretty tight place, Mr. Ignatius, perhaps you won't mind answering a few questions. By asking how you came into the affair, possibly I was putting the cart before the horse. What I would like to get clear in my mind is in what way you come to be associated with Nanradoc and Miss Olwen Jones at all."

"My little group of serious thinkers was invited a year or two ago by Miss Jones to spend a summer at Nanradoc, where we could conduct our devotions in seclusion."

"I see. Was she one of your group?"

"Yes, indeed she was. She heard me speak at a meeting in Chester, where she had gone to look at an exhibition of her brother's paintings."

"Really? I thought she and her brother were not on speaking terms. Why should she want to go and look at his pictures?"

"Sisterly love continued, even though they had parted in anger on her side and with remorse on his."

"You know, then, why he dislikes Nanradoc so much, and has said that he will never live there again?"

"Oh, yes, he has a very good reason for this attitude. His sister met with a very serious accident after the two of them inherited the estate, an accident which was wholly Mr. Pembroke's fault. He never forgave himself, but, out of the charity of her soul, his sister brought herself, in the fullness of time, to forgive him and to see the lameness which resulted from her accident as a tiny cog in the Everlasting Wheel of the Cosmos."

"What was the cause of the accident?"

"I never learned, and I have never pressed Olwen to tell me. Suffice it that she has come to terms with herself and has expunged all bitterness and hatred from her heart."

"She doesn't seem to be lame now, though."

"Ah, you noticed that, did you? Who, my dear Herring, can begin to grasp the reasons for the mysterious turning of the Everlasting Wheel?"

"Do you read *Kim*?"

"No, no, I read the stars; I read the infinitesimal wonders of the natural universe; I read the lore of bird and beast, the flowers, the grass, the trees."

"Well, that all sounds very charming. Good-bye, Mr. Ignatius. Just one word in your ear: I wouldn't come here

again, if I were you. I might be tempted to give you in charge another time. Next time we meet, it will be at Nanradoc. I am sure that, if matters are as you have stated, Miss Olwen Jones will be delighted to welcome back her erring brother. I shall take pleasure in informing him that all is forgiven, if not, as they say, forgotten."

"Pembroke Jones will never come to Nanradoc!" cried the monk.

"You think not? I wouldn't like to bet on it, and I advise you not to do so," said Timothy, interested in the momentary look of complete consternation in the monk's dark eyes before they resumed their usual expression of withdrawn, unfocussed serenity. "Anyway, I shall be seeing you again, I have little doubt."

"I look forward to our next meeting," said the monk. A much less sensitive ear than Timothy possessed could have detected the menace in his voice.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

## Doubting Timothy

Although he sometimes acted on impulse, as in the case of his rehousing Marion and the children, Timothy was not a fool. He had a quixotic streak which occasionally over-rode his commonsense, but he had realised, from the beginning, that the Nanradoc affair had an all-pervading odour of the rodent about it and, with every succeeding event, this odour became stronger and less subtle.

When he returned to the Phisbe headquarters he went down to the basement, made certain that the back door was bolted and the downstairs windows closed, then returned to the kitchen and made himself a pot of strong tea. With this as stimulus, he went over in his mind all that had happened since he had first heard of Nanradoc and had met Marion Jones.

Marion's writing to Phisbe in the first place had been innocent and comprehensible enough. Some of her subsequent conduct he had found less innocent and far from comprehensible. "In-and-out running" was the phrase which, to his mind, passed none too harsh a verdict on her behaviour. He considered this behaviour in detail, but was aware of the difficulty of summing it up. The trouble was that, although he partly distrusted her, he liked Marion and, to that extent, was prejudiced in her favour.

"Tabulation," he said aloud. "The detective's secret weapon." He took Coningsby's scribbling-tablet out of the

drawer. So many leaves had already been used for rough notes, and then torn out, that he felt no compunction in appropriating the book to his own use.

Marion's original application to Phisbe could be ignored. The Society received dozens of such letters in the course of a year. The facts which could not be ignored were, first, that Marion had adopted three children and, secondly, that, having done so, she had housed them and herself in such a dingy and (what was much worse) such an unfriendly house as the one in Earls Court. She claimed that she had done so because the rooms were cheap, but Timothy could not help wondering whether rooms outside London would not have been equally inexpensive and far more desirable. After all, nowhere in London was so cheap that all disadvantages could be overlooked.

In fairness to her, there was, of course, the question of her job, but, in a time of acute teacher-shortage, did one have to hang on to one's job to that extent? He thought not. As for accommodation, she could manage quite well, until the children were older, with three rooms and a kitchen, even if the kitchen had to be used also as a bathroom. However, she had decided upon the Earls Court place, and it was up to her to please herself, he supposed.

The real trouble had started when he took her to Nanradoc and allowed her to wonder whether she might have some claim to the house and the estate. He blamed himself entirely for that, and from it, of course, everything else had followed.

As for his idiocy in espousing her cause to the extent of lodging her and the three children on Phisbe's third floor, he could put that down to one reason only. He had been affronted by the two women who had constituted themselves Marion's critics, and who had reflected, with no evidence whatever to support their argument, upon her moral character. "No, (thought Timothy), dash it, that's not true. I didn't give a damn what they thought of Marion.

What really annoyed me was that they thought she was my little cup of tea. They called in question my taste in women, and thought that Marion was my choice of pick-up. Why, the three kids alone would be enough to put off any right-thinking man, let alone the fact that the poor girl is indeed what Kipling unchivalrously called a hag and a rag and a hank of hair, or something."

He visualised her: Marion pleading with him to persuade Phisbe to lend her the money to repair Nanradoc Castle; her despair when she saw the ruins; her cupidity when he had suggested that the whole estate might fall to her; her reluctance to be housed on Phisbe's third floor and her falling-out with the Dewes. (Faults on both sides there, no doubt. The Dewes had not wanted her, and certainly had not wanted the children, about the place. Small blame to them for that, but not pleasant for Marion.)

He speculated upon this particular type of unpleasantness and found himself dissatisfied with Marion. She was living rent-free in quarters and in a neighbourhood infinitely more agreeable than the district of Earls Court in which he had found her. The Dewes, whatever their prejudices, were surely to be preferred as fellow-inmates to Mrs. Ralley and Mrs. Studd. The children had only to be escorted across the street to be able to play in Kensington Gardens. Marion could take them over there for games and a picnic tea. Surely she could meet the Dewes half-way and keep them placated and happy? It was unnecessary and certainly unpolitic to antagonise them.

At this point in his meditations another idea occurred to him. He tenderly touched the lump which the poker had raised on his head. He had found the poker lying across Marion's bed. She had been most unwilling to have him go up to the third floor that night. Somehow the monk had obtained admission to the Phisbe premises and there was nothing to suggest that he had broken in. The poker was



long and heavy. The lump on Timothy's head was at the back.

He found the poker, which had been kept in the kitchen, went into Coningsby's office in search of a ruler marked off in inches and also found a soft-lead pencil. Then he went to the foot of the attic stair. As he passed by, he flicked open the door of the top cupboard in which Mrs. Dewes kept her upstairs cleaning materials. It was a roomy cubby-hole, as large as some modern spare bedrooms, and he felt sure that, at separate times, Marion and the monk had hidden themselves in it.

He mounted the narrow stairs to the attic and measured the depth between the top and the second-from-top step. Then he stood on the top step with his back against the wall, laid the pencil across his head, point first, and made a mark. A short calculation, followed by an experimental slosh with the poker, showed him that it would have been quite possible for a person of Marion's height, standing as much as three or even four stairs below him, to have hit the back of his head.

"Proof presumptive, but, of course, not proof positive," he said aloud, and all his suspicions returned with doubled intensity. If he was right, there could be little doubt but that she and the monk were in collusion, so that the only reason for the blow on the head had been to allow the monk to make his escape on to the roof. But, once on the roof, he could not escape any further; that was the objection to the theory that Marion was in league with him, for, if *he* did not realise that, once on the roof, there was no means of getting down except through the attic of another house or (as had happened) by fireman's ladder, surely Marion would have known this—or did she, perhaps, not know it?

He gave up these speculations and went downstairs as a loud knocking came on the back door. He unlocked and unbolted it to admit Mrs. Dewes and the children. The latter

were grimy, happy, and expansive. He went with them into the kitchen.

"Well, how did you get on?" he asked.

"I had hamburgers and ice-cream and Coke," said Bryn. "And we rode on elephants and camels and things."

"I had sausage rolls and doughnuts," said Bron. "Oh, and ice-cream and lemonade. I went pop."

"I'm not surprised," said Timothy. He picked up Miranda. "And what did you have, Mrs. Noah?"

"A ride on a lion," said Miranda.

"They were ever so good, sir," said Mrs. Dewes. "No trouble at all. I'm sure we're very much obliged, sir. I'll just give you your change."

"You give yourself a cup of tea," said Timothy. "I'm sure you must have earned it. I'm just off, as a matter of fact. By the way, I've seen the police about last night. There won't be any more trouble."

By five o'clock he was on his way to Shrewsbury, having rung up Parsons and made sure of his welcome. After lunch on the following day he was in Pembroke Pritchard Jones's drawing-room. Marion was still with her cousin and would be staying until she caught her train in the morning.

"You'd better stay, too, if you won't mind sleeping in here on a camp bed," said Leonie, "and then you can take Marion back with you."

"I've got a return ticket," said Marion. "Tim and I are not friends."

"Aren't we?" asked Timothy, ironically. "Well, fancy that! I hope you'll forgive me for the harsh thoughts I entertained of you! We've had fun and games since you left. I wonder whether you've described to Jones our friends at Nanradoc?"

"She has," said Jones. "It makes a mystery."

"Perhaps you'd care to have my description of the lady."

"Surely. Go ahead. If your description tallies at all with what Marion has told us, the simple fact is that the woman

can't be my sister, for all that she seems to call herself by Olwen's name."

Timothy described the trousered woman. When he had finished, Jones shook his head.

"Unless Olwen has changed a great deal, that doesn't sound like my sister," he said. "Olwen is small and thin, and (although she isn't) she looks fragile. You say that this is a large, heavy, masculine type of female who certainly won't see fifty again. My sister is a lot younger than I am; in fact, she's thirty-two, not much older than Marion here, and, because of her slight build and fair hair, she looks a good bit younger than she is. I can't think how she came to sell Nanradoc to these people, but that's what I think must have happened."

"She can't have done," said Leonie, decidedly. "One of you can't sell without the other's consent. They must simply be tenants, and, if they are, then Olwen ought to be paying you half the rent."

"Of course, Olwen and I had a row," said Jones, "so it's quite likely she may have acted without consulting me. Anyway, I can't go along at present. I'm much too busy."

"Oh, nonsense! You mean you're much too lazy," said his wife. "We'll go tomorrow, as soon as we've seen Marion off. What were the fun and games you mentioned, Tim?"

Timothy glanced at Marion and raised his eyebrows. She flushed, and looked angrily at him. "So she *is* beautiful," he thought.

"I'm going for a walk," she said. "I don't suppose Tim wants to blacken my character to my face. Anyway, you don't have to believe every word he says!" She tore out of the room and, to stress her feelings, slammed the door violently behind her.

"Well!" said Leonie, staring at the door which Marion had slammed shut. "And what's the meaning of that?"

"Oh, hasn't she told you about the goings-on? Well, I'm not surprised. She's feeling sore at me, and I'm not sure I'm

very pleased with *her*, as a matter of fact."

"Unburden yourself," said Leonie. "If it's fit for Pembroke's ears, that's to say."

"Has Marion asked you to give her and the children a temporary home here?"

"She has. We can't, of course. She must be pretty desperate to have put forward such a suggestion. She knows perfectly well why we pay her to look after Miranda. The idea of *three* children about the place is impossible to contemplate, and we had to tell her so."

"Yes, I see. I feel responsible for them all, as I winkled them out of those ghastly rooms in Earls Court, so it's up to me to find them somewhere, I suppose. I may tell you that it was not at my suggestion that she asked to park herself and the kids on you. I knew you wouldn't agree. All I suggested was that she should come here alone, as she was determined to come."

"It isn't completely your responsibility," said Pembroke. "If I'd never made her that offer of Nanradoc Castle you'd never have known she existed. But, after all, the fact remains that she's my cousin and Miranda is my daughter."

"It's certain she can't live here! If we have to take Miranda back, well, that's that," said Leonie harshly. "I suppose we can engage a nurse or someone to take her off our hands. As for housing Marion and her twins, that's quite unthinkable." She glared angrily at her husband. "So don't be a fool!"

"She can stay on at Phisbe for a bit, if she will," said Timothy. "Didn't she tell you why she felt she couldn't?"

"She indicated that matters were complicated there, and thought that you wanted her to go. Do tell us what happened," said Leonie, calming down. Timothy gave the details. He omitted offering his opinion of Marion's part in the night's work. He was allowed to finish his story without a single interruption, and there was silence when he came to the end of it. Then Pembroke said,

"It's all of a queer do. My sister Olwen was always a starry-eyed idiot, but this pseudo-monk is a new departure entirely. He's completely phoney, I take it, and therefore he must be a villain."

Timothy agreed, and, before any more could be said, Marion came back.

"It's beginning to rain," she said, in excuse of her abrupt reappearance. "I suppose Tim has told you I hit him over the head with a poker and laid him out?"

"No. He said the Nanradoc monk did that," said Leonie. "Sit down and join in the rest of the conclave. We've just decided that there's dirty work afoot. Tim has been giving us his report. The police were called, and they called the fire brigade, to pick the reverend father off the roof where he was treed. It made an enthralling story. I'm glad he came. Go on, Timmy. We're all agog."

"I don't think there's any more," said Timothy. "I had a brief chat with Mr. Ignatius, after he'd been lowered to safety, and advised him not to trouble us again, but he did give me one bit of information—if information it was. He said that Olwen Jones had been caught up into his group of fanatics, whatever they are, after she had heard him speak, and that she asked whether they would like accommodation at Nanradoc."

"The devil she did!" exclaimed Pembroke. "When and where did she pick up this charlatan, then?"

"A couple of years or so ago, I gathered, in Chester."

"In Chester? But . . ."

"She seems to have gone to an exhibition of your paintings."

"She couldn't have done! We'd had the most fearful row. She—she met with an accident which lamed her. She thought it was my fault. Well, I suppose it was, in a way. It happened soon after I was married and took Leonie to live at Nanradoc. Olwen hated the marriage . . ."

"She hated *me*," said Leonie.

“Only because she thought you had taken me away from her. We’d always been pretty close, Olwen and I. I was a lot older than she was, and I think I’d been a bit of a hero to her. She didn’t want anybody muscling in on our relationship, and she blackguarded Leonie to me on more than one occasion. I refused to be angry with her because I knew what she was feeling, but one day I got so fed up with it that I took her out for a mountain scramble while Leonie was working—Leonie had the castle chapel as a studio when she was carving; we had it built up a bit to shelter her from the wind, but we didn’t roof it because a drop of rain didn’t hurt the stone she worked on, and she liked the fresh air—and on this scramble I had a few hard things to say to Olwen. She took them badly, of course, and, after we’d had a bit of an up-and-downer while we stopped to eat our lunch, she said she might as well be dead.”

“What happened was her own fault, not yours,” said Leonie. “It’s silly to blame yourself, silly and wrong.”

“She took the lead after we started again,” said Pembroke. “She was light and keen and very sure-footed, and she was so furious that she set a cracking pace and I had all I could do to keep up with her. Well, we came to the Esgair, a long ridge with a lot of scree on the north slope of it, and instead of keeping along the top of it she suddenly veered off and lost her footing and went slithering and rolling down towards the valley. I shouted, and went after her, somehow keeping my feet on the beastly shale, but my extra weight and the pace I was making dislodged a small boulder. It went crashing down and caught her leg and crushed it.”

“It wasn’t your fault!” cried Leonie. “It was her own bad-temper and madness. You are not to blame yourself! It’s all wrong! I’m sure she really meant to kill herself.”

“When she came out of hospital,” went on Pembroke, “it was known that she would be crocked for the rest of her life. As soon as she could get about—she’d had an amputation,

of course—I left Nanradoc, and I never want to see the place again.”

“He tried to make over the whole estate to her,” said Leonie, “but the lawyers wouldn’t let him. We tried to keep in touch with Olwen, too, but she wouldn’t answer our letters. We knew she’d got good servants, so we didn’t—at least, I didn’t—worry too much.”

“Well, there don’t seem to be any servants there now,” said Marion. “I think Pembroke should pull himself together and go along to Nanradoc and find out what’s going on.”

“There’s another thing, too,” said Timothy. “This woman who calls herself Olwen Jones certainly isn’t lame. Don’t you think that perhaps the injury to the leg was not as serious as you thought?”

“The bone was crushed. There was an amputation below the knee,” said Pembroke. He was silent and the others respected his silence. Suddenly he broke it. “I’m not satisfied,” he said, “about this woman you said you saw. I’m not satisfied about this monk fellow. All right! I *will* go to Nanradoc! I’ll face the bogey-man! I’ll sort that couple out! If there are no servants any longer there must be something wrong. And, by God, Marion,” he added, swinging round on her so suddenly and with such ferocity that she shrank back and clutched at Timothy’s sleeve, “you’re coming with me. You’ve mixed yourself up in this. You and this monkish clown have something up your sleeves. Brother? I don’t believe this rubbish about your brother! Those damned brats are your own, your fly-by-nights! Leonie is right! You’re out to get Nanradoc for them! Well, you won’t! You’ll come along out there with us and we’ll bring you face to face with this precious priest!”

Marion let go of Timothy’s sleeve. She was very pale but she spoke with composure, although Timothy could see that her hands were shaking.

“If you like to believe Leonie’s lies,” she said, “you’re welcome. All right. I’ll come with you to Nanradoc. And I

don't believe your story about your sister. You wanted to get rid of her, to get Nanradoc for yourself."

"Be quiet, Marion, at once! How dare you say such a thing!" screamed Leonie. There was a deathly silence. Then Leonie controlled herself, although obviously with an effort, and said, "We have all been talking wildly, and I'm sorry I said what I did. I take it back. You're only twenty-four, and Bryn and Bron can't possibly be your children. Please forgive me for anything I ever said to the contrary. Of course you must come with us to Nanradoc. The more witnesses we have there, the better. This business must be sorted out. If you ask me, it's been going on for far too long already."

"But what about her job?" asked Timothy. "Can you really take time off like this?" he added, turning to Marion.

"I shall lose some pay, I expect, but there won't be any fuss otherwise. I've pleaded urgent family business, to wit, that one of the children is ill. My boss knows it isn't true—I told her so over the telephone—but that's what I've written in the official letter regretting that I have to ask for leave of absence. That reason lets her out as well as myself, you see. It's a cast-iron excuse."

"Oh, well, that's that, then," said Leonie. "I think we'll go tomorrow, and take these people on the hop, but, before we go, I think, Pembroke, you'd better put old Simms in the picture. We're bound to need a lawyer sooner or later."

"Did my cousin Olwen live alone at Nanradoc, before this awful Father Ignatius turned up?" asked Marion.

"She wasn't married and so forth, if that's what you mean," replied Pembroke.

"Well, it's all very interesting," said Leonie, with suspicious brightness considering her recent outbursts, "and I'm glad there's a reason for getting Pembroke to put his affairs in order. I've been on to him for years to get together with Olwen and sell the estate. In any case, to quarrel with an only sister is utterly ridiculous. It's quite time they made friends again and got rid of Nanradoc, which is, and always



has been, a white elephant. It's off the map, so one's friends aren't too keen to pay visits; it's much too big; the servants' wages—ah, that reminds me, Pembroke!"

"I know," said Jones. "I'd thought of it myself. The servant's wages—and there aren't any servants any more."

"Half the wage-money is paid by Pembroke, and half by Olwen," Leonie explained. "He insisted on that when he and Olwen parted brass rags, and we left Nanradoc for good. The row was about me, as he said," she added, "and it wasn't only for the reason that Pembroke gave. He paints mostly landscapes, as you know, but I can't carve landscapes in stone. Olwen is a prudish little person, and wouldn't have naked models in the house. *Very* chapel-minded, I'm afraid."

"It was only another excuse to get at you," said Pembroke.

"And you're still footing half this bill for the servants' wages, are you, Jones?" asked Timothy, changing a subject which looked like becoming explosive once more. "If I may ask, in what form is the money paid?"

"It is sent in pound notes, and not even registered," said Leonie. "He thought it would be easier for Olwen that way, save her trouble, and so on, you know. I always said it was a foolish way of sending money, but he's very obstinate over some things."

"Was Miss Olwen Jones in the habit of sending you a receipt for the money, I wonder?"

"We never had a word of acknowledgment," said Leonie. "We never heard from her at all."

"What was the sum involved?"

"Sixty pounds a month. But if the servants have gone," said Leonie, "I don't know why Pembroke should go on paying it, and I can't imagine why Olwen goes on accepting it."

"Yes," said Timothy. "Things begin to look very interesting, don't they? I think you should take your wife's

advice, Jones, and get your solicitor on to this. It will save you a lot of bother if he's in on the affair from the beginning."

"Why, you don't think anything has *happened* to my sister, do you?" asked Jones, with marked anxiety. "She's obviously mixed up somehow with this wretched monk and his partner. It certainly looks fishy. As for Simms, I think it's a bit soon to involve him. I can ask him whether he still holds the deeds, of course."

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### The Birds Have Flown

Timothy's car took the four of them to Nanradoc, but not until after Leonie had telephoned Jones's lawyers. The knowledge she gained, after they had arranged to ring her back, was not reassuring. Simms, Simms, etc., no longer held the deeds of Nanradoc. Olwen Jones had had them sent to her so that she might lodge them in her bank in Chester, alleging that her brother had agreed to this course. Confronted with this assertion, Pembroke reluctantly agreed that he remembered a letter asking for his confirmation, and had answered it over the telephone, claiming that he hated writing letters.

"You didn't tell *me*," said Leonie. "I thought you hadn't heard from her after you parted. Why didn't you say?"

"Couldn't. You were in London, I seem to remember. But you wouldn't have had any objection to our lodging the deeds with the bank, would you? Cut a lot of red tape if we suddenly wanted to raise a mortgage on the property, I should think. And that was the only letter I had. You don't mind, do you?"

"Any objection of mine would now be beside the point, wouldn't it? But why Chester? We always banked in Mold."

"Olwen, I suppose, now banks in Chester. Anyway, it all comes back to me. They weren't keen—Sims, I mean—about acting on a telephone confirmation. They wanted it in writing because they said that, while they would be

prepared to forward the deeds direct to the bank, what Olwen wanted was to have them sent to Nanradoc so that she could look them over before she deposited them. Simms pointed out the risk of fire and so forth, but she had made up her mind, so, of course, I wrote the letter to save argument. Anyway, I felt that Nanradoc was hers, because of her accident."

"And I suppose it never occurred to you to get in touch with Olwen and ask her what she was up to?"

"Good heavens, no! I was in the middle of my Academy picture. I simply hadn't time, and, anyway, couldn't be bothered."

"Didn't you wonder why your sister wanted to see the deeds?" asked Timothy.

"I never thought another thing about it until Marion came on the scene and wrote to say that she had two kids to look after and wanted somewhere to live. That was when we fobbed off Miranda on to her (with an allowance, of course) and I offered her Nanradoc if she would get it repaired."

"You were thinking only of the castle, of course."

"That's right."

"Did you add the word 'castle' in your offer?"

"Can't remember."

"No matter," said Leonie. "It doesn't affect our projected enterprise. Let's get moving, shall we? Have we a key to the bridge?"

"Yes, I've got mine," said Timothy, "on my key-ring with my others."

"I haven't one," said Pembroke, "but, of course, I've still got a key to the house. The key to the bridge doesn't matter all that much, because, of course, there's a road up to the house from the opposite side of the hill."

"We'll go by the bridge," said Leonie. "More likely to take them by surprise."

The party went by way of the ruined castle and the woodland path, crossed the river, and, in the meadow which formed part of the park, passed a cowherd. They called out a greeting, to which he responded.

Timothy said,

“That’s a bit odd.”

“What is?” asked Leonie. Pembroke, who had become taciturn as he approached his old home, showed no interest until Timothy, replying to Leonie, said,

“That a chap should be herding the cows.”

“Always *has* been a chap herding the cows,” said Pembroke, in testy tones. “Been a regular letting of that part of the estate since my grandfather’s time.”

“You mean they’re not, so to speak, your family cows?”

“No, never have been. It’s rich grass here—the river, you know—and a local farming family have rented it ever since I can remember. Their own land is all right for sheep, but not good enough for cattle, and I daresay they were glad enough to get ours. There’s nothing odd about it.”

“There is, you know,” said Timothy. “When I came here to see the place, these people said—at least, the monkish person did—that, in addition to paying the rates and looking after the house and the gardens, they milked the cows.”

“Probably his idea of a joke.” Pembroke said no more until, having thundered on the door to no effect, he used his latchkey and led the way into the mansion. “I’ll just take a quick look round if you’ll all stay here a minute,” he said. He came back with a small notebook on whose black cover lay a sheet of writing-paper inscribed in large letters with the words *Rent Book*. Pembroke opened the book, allowing the piece of paper to flutter to the ground. He turned over the pages. They were covered with small receipted rent-bills, duly stamped and endorsed. “So the monk is a tenant,” he remarked. “It doesn’t seem like Olwen to have let the place and kept the rent without letting me know anything about it.”

"You'd had a pretty frightful row, you know," said Leonie.

"Yes, I know. But that would only have made her all the more anxious to make sure I got my share of anything she collected on the house."

Timothy had picked up the piece of paper. The notice it bore was so entirely unnecessary that he felt some curiosity concerning it.

"Mind if I have a look at the book?" he asked.

"Help yourself," said Pembroke, who had relinquished it. "I wonder when the tenant will be back?"

"I don't think he will be," said Timothy. "Just give me half a minute." Rapidly he counted the receipts and then he turned back to the beginning of the book and studied the dates which had cancelled the two-penny stamps. "The rent appears to have been paid every six months," he said. "Take a look at these dates and see whether you don't think there is something rather interesting about them. And then tell me what you think about the ink in which they and the indecipherable initials, which have been used in lieu of a signature, are written."

Pembroke did as he was asked, but shook his head. Leonie, who had been looking over his shoulder, said,

"You mean the ink is quite fresh."

"And the stamps?"

"I don't see anything wrong with the stamps."

"Not in connection with the dates? The dates are written clearly enough."

"Timmy! Stop being knowledgeable and aggravating! Tell us what you mean," urged Leonie. She sounded a little breathless.

"Well, for what it's worth," said Timothy, "and there may be an acceptable explanation, of course, about half these receipts were made out before all the English stamps were given changes of colour, yet every stamp in the book is the present-day colour of the two-penny variety. What's

more—although I'm not sure about this—I don't believe a two-penny stamp on a receipt is still necessary, even for amounts of over two pounds, yet these are all stamped, including the last one, which appears to have been dated for last week."

"I think you *are* still supposed to put a stamp on," said Marion, speaking for almost the first time since they had left the car, "but it's really beside the point. You mean this receipt-book is false from beginning to end, don't you? And, if it is, it's intended to give the impression that these people had a right to be here, and had rented the place, whereas, really, no rent has been paid at all. That's why Timothy thinks they won't come back."

"These people? *They?*" said Pembroke. "But what has happened to Olwen? She ought to have let me know she'd let the place and gone off on her own! It really is too bad of her, whatever had happened between us."

"Oh, Olwen has always been unpredictable and a bit of a nuisance," said Leonie. "I shouldn't think there's any need to worry."

"I'm not worrying, dammit! I only hope nothing's happened to her, that's all. Anyway, as we've got the house to ourselves, I'm going to nose round. Will you come and help me?"

Left to themselves, Marion and Timothy remained silent. Timothy walked over to the window. Before him, beyond the garden, lay the park, and to the left of this he could see the bold and rocky summits of twin mountains separated only, it seemed, by a cleft. He took them to be Glyder Fawr and Glyder Fach, lying beyond Llyn Ogwen. Parsons, he knew, had climbed them, but Timothy was no mountaineer. He turned at last and, with his hands in his pockets, surveyed Marion.

"Don't you want to look at the view?" he asked. "I wonder whether that's where Olwen had her accident?"

Marion joined him, but refused to speculate.

"Have you a cigarette?" she asked. Timothy opened his case, lit her cigarette for her, and said,

"Cheer up. And, look here, you'll have to sink your sinful pride and come back to Phisbe for a bit until we can get you fixed up."

"There's no need to bother yourself about me." She went over to a chair and seated herself.

"Oh, I don't. I'm only concerned about the brats."

"Yes," she said, dispiritedly, "so am I. What am I going to do, Tim?"

"Not live here, at any rate."

"No, I couldn't, even if those two awful creatures would have me."

"They'd have *you*, apparently, but not the children. Pembroke and Leonie will take Miranda back, if they have to, but that still leaves the twins. A solution might be to send them to boarding-schools for a bit, while you look round for somewhere to live.

"Oh, Tim, don't be so foolish! How on earth would I afford the fees at a boarding-school?"

"I'm not being foolish. I mean, of course, that I would find the fees. I feel I've got you into a mess, so let me be a sort of honorary uncle to the twins while I get you out of it. I assure you that my intentions would bear the closest scrutiny."

"I know," she said, with a slight but bitter smile. "It's been perfectly obvious all along that they are entirely honourable."

"Yes," said Timothy, "that is so, but you must admit that I have *made* it perfectly obvious. When the other two have made their survey, I suggest we go out and find the lake which must lie somewhere between here and those far-off mountains. 'He walked in glory on the hills, we dalesmen envied him afar.'"

"I don't think they're all that far off," she said prosaically, but she allowed him to pull her up out of her



chair and obediently accompanied him to the window. They were silent again as they stood side by side and looked out at the view. Then Marion added, "If you *did* fix up what you said for Bryn and Bron, you'd agree to a business arrangement, I suppose? I mean, I'd have to take some time to pay you back, but . . ."

"Of course you can pay me back, and also for the flat, house, or bungalow we're going to find you—unless you'd prefer to live in a boat or a caravan. And now, begone, dull care, and let us immerse ourselves in the mystery which enfolds us. You *could* draw aside the curtain on one small aspect of it, though, if you would."

"I could?"

"I think so. The monkish freak told me, more or less, that you let him in on to Phisbe's premises."

"And you want me to admit it?"

"Well, it would clear up a tiny but interesting point."

"All right. I *did* let him in. He was loitering about when I came home from school one afternoon, and he said he'd come to see you. I told him you weren't there, so he asked whether he might come in and write you a note."

"And you let him?"

"Well, it seemed reasonable, seeing what a journey he'd made, but, of course, I had no idea he had stayed in the house and hidden himself away as he must have done."

"Didn't you see him off, then?"

"He knew I was busy getting the children's tea. I asked him whether he would like some, but he said he would have to be going, and would see himself out."

"Where was Mrs. Dewes, then? She usually guards that front door like a Cerberus."

"I suppose she was out shopping. She generally gets something savoury in for her husband's tea."

"When you heard the furniture being moved about—the first time, I mean—I suppose you didn't think of connecting it with the monk?"

"No, of course I didn't. It never crossed my mind that he could still be in the house. I thought it was the Dewes. They hadn't been all that considerate about making noises after the children were in bed. Besides, the noises began before he came."

"And *did* the fellow leave a note for me? You say he came in to write one."

"I've no idea. He didn't give me anything to hand to you. I suppose he decided to post it."

"Then he changed his mind again. That is my sarcastic way of pointing out to you, you young mutton-head, that he simply used a device to get himself admitted into the house. I still wish I knew what he expected or hoped to find there. I've ransacked the place, and I simply haven't a clue."

"I thought we agreed that he was there to look for the deeds of Nanradoc. He thought you had them."

"It's a theory, of course, and, on the face of it, a likely one. I can't think of any other."

"Before they come in, Tim, tell me what you think about today's doings. It's very mysterious, you know, those two awful people not being here, and that rent-book left out in such a conspicuous place."

"Yes, it looks as though we were expected, and that the ground had been prepared. It also looks like something else to me. Not only are those precious souls not here to receive us, but my bet would be that they have no intention of ever coming back. I think the rent-book is a stupid attempt at a blind. I don't believe for an instant that any rent has been paid, and the trousered woman *can't* be Jones's sister. I can't help wondering what has happened to Olwen."

Leonie and Pembroke had descended the stairs, but, instead of entering the room straightway, they could be heard in murmured colloquy outside the door. This gave Timothy time to do a little swift thinking. His suspicions of Marion, which had lain dormant for the past few hours, awakened again in his mind. The story she had told to

account for the fact that she had introduced the monk into the Phisbe house began to seem rather thin. He wanted to believe her, but it seemed to him highly unlikely that, feeling as she claimed she did about Father Ignatius and his companion, she should have been willing to admit him into a house where, on her own admission, she was, at the time of his entrance, the only adult.

Yet the fact still remained that she *had* let him in. This tallied with the monk's own statement that he had gone into the house with her. Whether to believe her or not when she claimed that she thought he had gone away again and that she had not connected the noises of the night with him, Timothy did not know. He was relieved when the other two came back into the room. They seemed to be perturbed about something, and immediately made known the reason for this.

"I say," said Pembroke, "that woman who's been here with the monk person. Would you describe her to me again?"

Timothy did so, emphasizing her height and girth.

"From the description you gave of your sister, I thought we agreed that this woman is somebody else," he concluded.

"I wonder whether it's worse than that," said Pembroke gloomily. "Could you make a guess at her height?"

"Not much good at that sort of thing, but, as I said, she's pretty tall," Timothy replied. "Taller than Marion, anyway."

"I'm five feet six and three-quarters," said Marion, "and she's quite a bit more than that, and takes at least a six and a half in shoes."

"I wish you'd come upstairs with me, then," said Pembroke. "I want to show you some clothes." He and Marion went up together, leaving Leonie and Timothy downstairs. She accepted a cigarette from him and said,

"You don't think anything's *happened* to Olwen, do you? I'm sure the clothes we found in a wardrobe and in a chest of drawers up there are hers. They would never fit a woman as tall and big as you say Trousers is. Pembroke is worried to death about Olwen since he insisted upon snooping into wardrobes and drawers. He found what I am positively certain must be his sister's clothes—and an awful lot of them, too."

Pembroke and Marion returned to the ground floor. Leonie raised her eyebrows. Her husband scowled and nodded.

"I'm going to put the police on the job," he said. "A woman doesn't just go off and leave most of her clothes behind her. It's ridiculous. There are coats and hats and shoes and everything."

"I've tried to persuade him that she may not have gone off at all," said Marion. "The fact that Tim and I didn't see her when we came last time proves nothing."

"All right. I'll find out what they can tell me in the village, then," said her cousin, "but if it isn't satisfactory I shall go to the police and get them to trace my sister. I know we had a row and said we never wanted to see one another again, but that's beside the point. I've got to satisfy myself that she's all right, and I've got a bloody awful feeling that she isn't."

"We'll go home now," said Leonie, "and sleep on it. Then, if you're of the same mind, we'll drive into the village tomorrow and make some enquiries. If those don't work out, then you can get in touch with the police."

"There's an hotel near the village, isn't there? If they can let us have a room, we'll stay the night and begin our enquiries the very first thing in the morning," said Pembroke. "I shan't be satisfied until I've sifted things. What will *you* do, Marion?"

"I've got my return ticket for London. I'm afraid I can't afford to stay at hotels. Are you going back tonight, Tim?"

"No. I've a fancy to camp out here," said Timothy, "if Jones has no objection. I want to find out whether those two have really slung their hook."

"That's rather a scheme," said Pembroke. "I think I'll join you. You two girls can stay at the hotel if there's room. Don't bother about the bill, Marion. That will be all right."

The hotel was full, but the receptionist recommended two cottages which let rooms. Arrangements were made, the party had tea at the hotel itself, and stayed on for dinner, then the two women were escorted to their lodgings and Timothy and Pembroke returned in the fading light to Nanradoc by the road which led to the front of the house. There they left the car, locked, on the gravel outside the main door and went inside.

"Better just snoop around to make sure we've still got the place to ourselves," suggested Pembroke. Timothy agreed, although he had little doubt of it. A short but complete survey convinced them that they were the only occupants, so Pembroke locked up and they sat talking and smoking until, at close on midnight, Pembroke announced that he was going to bed.

"In somebody else's sheets?" enquired the fastidious Timothy. "I'll kip down here in a couple of armchairs, I think. I don't somehow fancy a bed that the flapping Father has slept in."

"Oh, I shall lie on top of the blankets," said Pembroke. "Can't undress, anyway. No pyjamas. Wonder how the girls will manage?"

"Girls always manage," said Timothy. "Did you lock up, or shall I?"

"It's all fixed, except the bolts on the front door. I suggest we leave them alone. I'd like to know it if those two *do* come back. Not that I think they will. They don't appear to have left anything of their own behind them. I wish I knew how Olwen fits in to all this. I shan't rest until I've found out."

“Is she a sensible sort of girl?”

“I wouldn’t have said so. She’s headstrong and unstable. Spoilt, you know, and, of course, quite unworldly-wise. I’m afraid this precious pair may have taken her for a ride. I only hope she’s safe.”

When Pembroke had left him, Timothy settled down in a couple of armchairs, slept uncomfortably and on a hair-trigger, and got up as soon as dawn broke. He was feeling stiff and rather cold, and decided to go for a brisk walk. Before taking the air he prowled around the ground floor of the mansion, examining doors and windows, but everything was intact, so he let himself out and walked to the bridge and up through the woods to the castle.

He entered the ruined keep and again marked the depression in the floor which indicated the presence of a well. He supposed that at some time the family had had it filled in as a precautionary measure when Pembroke and Olwen were children. He climbed the safer of the newel stairs and admired the view, and when he climbed down again he turned his attention to the remainder of the buildings. It was very clear that there had been some very recent attempt to restore what he took to be the chapel, and he was reminded that there had been the reference to a studio for Leonie. Then he thought of Father Ignatius, that flapping black crow of a man, and his incongruous companion. Their every action, from their first gesture in giving him a key to the bridge, had been a cause for suspicion and a mystery. Contemplating the little building, he wondered whether the Father had been in the habit of holding strange, heretical services there. Perhaps there would be rumours of this in the village. He ducked in under a small Norman arch and looked about him at the chapel. A projection at the apsed end might have been used as an altar, he thought, and somebody had been at pains to lay a rectangle of flat stones in front of it to form some rough flooring, but that might have been for Leonie’s benefit, he

surmised. For the rest, the weeds grew rank but had been trampled, and that quite recently. In one corner there was a hawthorn bush, and in another some ash saplings had been planted. In the middle of the weedy nave a dead elm-branch had been stuck into the ground.

“Not much doubt about it, there have been some peculiar goings-on in this little place,” thought Timothy. He went outside and examined the walls again. It was easy enough to see where and how they had been built up, but no attempt had been made to put a roof on the small building, as Pembroke had explained. Then another point occurred to him. An apsed end to a chapel in a castle, although not, perhaps, rare, was sufficiently unusual, so far as his experience went, as to be of interest, but there was something about this particular apse which was not so much unusual as, possibly, unique. It was not only new—that is to say, it was not a restoration—but it faced the wrong way. Instead of being at the east end of the chapel, it faced north. He fished out his pocket compass to make sure of this. He was not mistaken. Whoever had added the apse to the existing remains of the building either had paid no attention to the usual, in fact, the generally-accepted, orientation of a sacred edifice, but had deliberately placed the altar so that the congregation would be facing in what, by popular superstition, was the devil’s direction.

Possibly there was nothing significant in this. *But* the apse was new. Like the French store-keeper, informed by the English sergeant that he wished to purchase meat, cabbages, a couple of fowls, potatoes, chestnuts, milk, and brandy *pour la messe*, Timothy was inclined to exclaim, “*Mais, quelle religion!*” Leaving his contemplation of the surprising little adjunct to the chapel of the great hall, he turned his attention to the latter.

It would be no great matter, he thought, to build up the walls, using the stone which was scattered about the bailey and on the outside of the curtain, to a sufficiently

impressive height to give the windows, at present mere topless gaps, a form and a significance. He walked round inside the building, making mental notes. Of course, it would be a job for Parsons—he was the expert—but, from what Parsons himself had said, there appeared to be no particular obstacles to overcome in the task of reparation.

The hall built up a bit in this way, the chapel restored to what must have been the original rectangular shape with the altar at the east end, the keep made safe so far as the newel staircases were concerned, and the well dug out and fenced round, and there, Timothy concluded, would be a fitting monument to Phisbe's enterprise and *raison d'être*.

He went back to the house in a thoughtful but jaunty mood, to find Pembroke sluicing himself at the kitchen sink and preparing to dry himself on his handkerchief.

"Not a towel in the place," he explained. "It looks to me as though whoever was here has cleared out for good and all. And there isn't a hope of a shave because we are both minus a razor. Have to see whether the hotel can help us out, or else we're going to present a tramplike appearance at breakfast. You seem to have been up with the lark. Couldn't you sleep?"

"Not very soundly. I've been out to look at your ruins. If your sister will agree, I'd like to rent them. I don't want the whole estate, and certainly not the house, but I can see what could be done with the castle."

"So far as I'm concerned, you can do what you like. Look here, Herring. I'm devilish worried about Olwen. If those people you met here are all right, why have they cleared out like this? And where has Olwen gone? I've got to find her. When I do, I'm sure she'll agree to what you want. Dash it all, she seems to have let this house to this fishy couple over my head and without offering me either an explanation or a penny piece, so I think I've got the whip-hand. The only trouble is that I hope I *do* find her. Spinsters living alone are a noted prey for adventurers and



confidence-trick merchants. Most lonely women don't seem to have the sense they were born with. That certainly holds good for Olwen. She always was an obstinate, dreary, moony-eyed little mutt! One of the 'stars are God's daisy-chain' experts. Oh, well, rinse up, if you're going to, and let's get along to breakfast. I can do with a nice cup of coffee and a plate of bacon and eggs."

"And I can go ahead with the castle?"

"Sure. I'll square Olwen when I find her. I only wish I could."

# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

## Nanradoc Renaissance

The hotel produced electric razors and towels, so that the two men presented an acceptable appearance at breakfast. Enquiry from the hotel manager failed to extract any information concerning the inhabitants of Nanradoc, but the post-office was more forthcoming.

Very few letters had been addressed to Nanradoc House for the past year or so, and no parcels had been delivered there, not even at Christmas. Father Ignatius and the trousered woman sometimes came to the village, but always on foot. They were never accompanied by Miss Olwen Jones, but she had been known to drive about in her little car, although not recently. "Not recently," it transpired, turned out to be not since the previous summer, or possibly even longer—it might be two years, perhaps.

It was rumoured that a group of people, perhaps as many as ten, had come to Nanradoc with Father Ignatius and his companion, but there seemed to be no certainty about this, and none of them had shopped in the village. As the Jones family had not shopped in the village either, this caused no surprise, although it may have occasioned some passing disappointment.

Except for these negative items, Pembroke gained nothing from the conversation except an even stronger determination to find out what had happened to his sister.

“Find out what’s happened to the deeds of the house first,” said Leonie. “Get Simms on to that. It will save you a lot of bother, and the banks will do for them what they might not do for you. And now let’s all go home. There’s nothing more that we can do here.”

“There’s one person I think we ought to see,” said Timothy, “and that’s the parson or minister, or whatever he is. If Father Ignatius was passing himself off as somebody in holy Orders, the local man of God is bound to know something about him, I should think. Ask them where he hangs out.”

The minister was a Baptist. He was a bearded man with a curious and unbecoming habit of appearing to blow his nose through his fingers as a kind of punctuation of his statements, although, fortunately, no unseemly result ensued. He had met the Father, but once only, and had spoken with him.

“He seemed a courtly man,” the minister informed them. “Very soft-spoken and gentle he was, and without arrogance or prejudice. He was telling me he had had a group of his own, a community calling themselves the Congregation of the Heavenly Unity, but that failing health had caused his retirement, so that only a handful of his people had followed him into Wales. Theirs, he said, was not actually a religious denomination, but what he called a brotherhood of the spirit. He assured me—although I had not mentioned the matter—that he would do no proselytising among my flock. “That I know,” I said, “for they would not listen to you.” He told me that Miss Olwen Jones had offered shelter to him and his followers after she had been to one of his meetings, and that he was very glad to accept it. I did not see him to speak to him again.”

There was nothing helpful about all this. Timothy drove Pembroke and Leonie home to Mold after the party had lunched at the hotel, and then took Marion on to Chester to catch her train. He himself went to Shrewsbury to put his

ideas for the rebuilding of Nanradoc Castle before Parsons, and to ask him to draw up the necessary plans and arrange for the work to be carried out.

“So you’re flogging *that* dead donkey, are you?” said Parsons.

“If the deeds of the property are still in safe hands, yes. It would be a gem of a place, don’t you think? I’ve always wanted to be the owner of a castle, and this will be almost as good as though it were my own. If only we can trace Olwen Jones, and get her to agree to a sale of the ruins and the bit of the estate, it *would* be my own, and I might (and I might not) let Phisbe in on it.”

“I suppose you realise what it will cost to put it into reasonable repair? Apart from the purchase price, I mean.”

“Near enough. Of course, as I say, Jones can’t sell without his sister’s consent, but he’s willing enough to let me undertake repairs, so I’m going ahead.”

“I always thought you had your mad moments, and this is one of them. Still, if you’re determined to chance your arm, who am I to stand in your way? I made some sketches and rough plans, as you know, so what I think needs to be done is this . . .”

Timothy Herring’s considerable fortune allowed him to ride his hobby-horses, so to speak, to almost any limit. He was a level-headed, business-like man as a rule, although possibly less so than he himself supposed, but when his interest was caught he did not count the cost of his experiments. No sooner had work begun on the partial restoration of Nanradoc Castle than his enthusiasm hatched new and expensive plans.

The first of these concerned the great hall. From a decision to raise the walls to a sufficient height to incorporate the windows, he added a scheme to replace the flooring between the undercroft and the hall proper, and so

give the building an appearance which approximated to that which it must have presented when it was first erected.

It was not possible to tell of what material the original flooring had been constructed, and a study of the subject in a modern standard work on medieval buildings\* gave him a choice of stone, wood (with a packing of beaten earth on top), mortar, clay, or tiles.

He settled for wood with two inches of packed mud, covered, when it had dried out, with straw, and then, to make this floor accessible, it was necessary to renew a spiral staircase, traces of which remained in an angle of the wall. To build this, the restorers had recourse to a late twelfth-century plan whereby each step incorporated its own addition to the circular newel post.

Some of the more specialised jobs had to be performed by a firm of contractors, but, by Timothy's orders, none of the ordinary workmen was ever laid off during these times. There was always some aspect of the reconstruction on which they could be employed. Parsons always had a job to give them, even if it was only to widen and improve the way from the road up to the site, so that lorries and trucks could ascend the hill more easily, or to sort out likely chunks of fallen stone which could then be used in the rebuilding of the walls.

They were fortunate in the weather, although there were several days when rain made the work impossible. These, however, were fortunately few, and by the end of the first three months considerable progress had been made and the end of the reconstruction was in sight.

"We can carry on until the end of October, with any luck," said Parsons, after supper one evening in September. "We ought to be finished by then. You say you don't want roofs. It's still got to look like a ruin. You have, I would say, an eighteenth-century mind."

“People wouldn’t find it romantic if it was all made wind-and-weather-proof,” protested Timothy. “And I want lots of people to come. Incidentally, when all else is done, these fellows will have to dig out the depression in the base of the keep. I’m certain it’s an old well. There ought to be traces of another one somewhere, too. We could look out for that and dig it out. There should be one much nearer the hall, sunk in the bailey. I’ll have a look for it myself.”

At mid-September there was a committee meeting of Phisbe which Timothy had to attend. The subject of Marion’s tenancy ought to have come up at the previous meeting in June but had been adroitly shelved by the president, briefed by Timothy, but the members could not be expected to entertain her and the children indefinitely, apart from the fact that Marion had written to say that the Dewes were again becoming restive and that Dewes had laid it down that he was not prepared to carry wood and coal up several flights of stairs if the central heating system proved inadequate to warm the upstairs rooms, which, in his opinion, was likely. The noises at night, she added, still went on. She suspected the Dewes and they suspected her.

On the fourteenth of September, therefore, Timothy drove to London, put up at his club and, on the late afternoon of the following day, garbed himself for the dinner which was to follow the committee meeting and drove to the Phisbe headquarters, where he telephoned his garage to collect the car and bring it back at seven.

He read the minutes (beautifully set out and typed by Coningsby) and the committee meeting proceeded according to plan until it came to Other Business. The president, who was, as usual, in the chair, looked meaningfully at Timothy.

“Yes,” said Timothy, “there are two things I’d like to bring before the meeting, if I may. Both are a little out of the ordinary. Members have heard the letter from Miss Marion Jones in which she requests the Society to repair a

thirteenth-century Welsh castle so that it may serve her (and three children for whom she has made herself responsible) as a dwelling-house. Very rightly, members have pointed out that we cannot undertake to do anything of the kind, and her submission, therefore, has been dismissed.

“Last April, as I felt some private interest in the matter, I went to look over the castle and the upshot is that I myself have undertaken to repair it to some extent, and our architect, Tom Parsons, is keeping the work under review. I need not add that the matter is personal to myself and that I have in no way involved Phisbe in the transaction. Parsons is being retained by me in a private capacity as architect, and I am paying for the labour and the materials.

“However, as the result may be of some interest I shall invite all members of the Society who care to make the journey, to attend a medieval banquet in the great hall of the castle as soon as the work is completed.” There was an appreciative murmur from the committee, but, before anyone became articulate, Timothy went on, “But now I have to beg your indulgence. I found the writer of the letter and her three small dependents living in considerable squalor, and for several weeks I have domiciled them on the hitherto unused third floor of this house. They are still here, but I have every intention of seeing that they leave as soon as suitable accommodation can be found for them, which I hope will be very shortly.”

He sat down and waited for the storm to break, but before anyone else could speak the president rose.

“I should like to add to that,” he said. “It was not possible to canvass the committee and find out the general opinion until this meeting was called, but Mr. Herring very rightly informed me of what he had done and, as it was to be a purely temporary measure, I saw no objection to it.”

The treasurer asked whether any rent was being paid.

"No," replied Timothy, "but there would be no objection to its being charged and, of course, backdated. The only point I think I ought to raise—and I am sure members will appreciate it—is that, as the rooms on the third floor were entirely devoid of furnishings, it might be very difficult for us to get rid of rent-paying tenants if they decided they wished to stay. As matters stand, Miss Jones has nothing but squatters' rights, and could be ejected tomorrow if necessary."

"Is this woman the mother of the children?" asked a woman member. "I believe I heard you refer to her as *Miss Jones*."

"No, she is not the mother," returned Timothy. "Two of the children are her brother's orphans and the third is an unwanted baby of two, of whom she takes charge."

"Well," said a young man with an impudent, lively face and a slight Irish accent, "it appears to me that by taking on these creatures and giving them a home, this unmarried lady is saving the taxpayers or the rate-payers or Doctor Barnado or somebody, a very great deal of money. Where's the harm in letting them stay?"

"Phisbe," said an elderly gentleman with a thin mouth and a straggling moustache, "is not a charitable institution, Mr. Rafferty."

"Oh, come off it, Cockington!" retorted the young Irishman. "What harm are they doing, at all?"

"What harm *are* they doing, Tim?" enquired the president.

"I should imagine they're doing a great deal of good," said the woman member, before Timothy could reply.

"Houses were meant to be lived in. I wish we could see the children," she added. She was a wealthy, childless widow.

"Nothing easier," said Timothy. "They'll have finished their tea by now. Perhaps Coningsby, who knows them, wouldn't mind trotting up to the third floor and bringing them down—with Miss Jones, of course."



Coningsby was gone some little time, and Timothy concluded that Marion was giving her charges a wash and brush up before submitting them to the scrutiny of the committee. They appeared at length, shepherded by an obviously nervous Marion who, all the same, looked considerably brighter than when Timothy had first made her acquaintance at the Earls Court lodgings.

Bryn and Bron advanced hand in hand, and Bryn made the company a deep bow.

"What darlings!" said the woman member. "Come here, children, and tell me your names." In addition to sprucing them up, Marion apparently had had time to give the twins a briefing, for they came forward, gave their names, and Bryn said, pointing,

"And she's Miranda."

The woman member pushed back her chair and went over to Marion and the baby.

"Will you give me a kiss?" she asked, picking the tiny child up in her arms.

"A wet one, full of love," said Miranda, obligingly.

"It's all over, bar the shouting," muttered Timothy to the president. "Nobody's going to turn them out after that!"

Relieved that he had no longer any need to find somewhere for Marion and her family to live, for, offered security of tenure on Phisbe's third floor, she had accepted it gratefully, Timothy returned to Nanradoc to see how the work was progressing.

As the keep was entirely separate from the great hall, work was done, under Parsons's supervision, on both at the same time. There were delays, but these had been expected. There were days so wet that no work was possible, holdups when loads of extra stone were not delivered at the promised time, a strike on the railway which lasted three weeks and held up essential materials, a go-

slow by the workmen when one of their number (entirely through his own fault) fell from some scaffolding and broke an arm, whereupon the men claimed danger-money and were not pleased when this was refused, and, in mid-October (a fortnight before it was planned to stop work for the winter) a bug which decimated the labour force and called a halt to the work until the following spring.

The winter snows fell, and it was not until almost the end of March that a fresh start was made, but Timothy and Parsons had every hope that a further four months, with luck, and not more than six, without it, would see Nanradoc in a fair state to receive visitors. The costs soared, but Timothy was happy.

It had been decided to make no walled sub-divisions in the undercroft of the great hall, but to support the first floor on a row of columns and a ribbed vault. On the first floor the stone screens which marked off the dining-hall from the kitchens and the buttery were built up, a permanent dais was erected and Timothy decided, after all, to have the building roofed. There were two reasons for this. He intended to furnish the place with tables and benches and to have a fire in it when he held his house-warming feast, and he intended that this feast should be prepared and cooked in the hall's own kitchens. He had not forgotten, either, Marion's idea of offering such banquets to the holiday public in return for money, and it would be expected, he felt, that these should be held under cover.

Meanwhile the little chapel had been cleaned out, floored with packed earth, and re-oriented, and the keep, with its two staircases, had been so far renewed as to allow not only the stairs to be ascended in safety, but a walk round the ramparts made possible. Here Parsons had copied the scheme in operation at Clifford's Tower in York, where it is possible and, for convenience' sake, desirable, to ascend by one narrow staircase and descend by the other.

The dilapidated curtain walls of the bailey, except where the hall and chapel had been built against them, were left in their state of picturesque decay, but the surface of the path to the small ruined gatehouse was improved and an inconspicuous lodge built at the roadside end of it, so that tickets of admission could be sold to the public by a paid custodian if Timothy decided to open the castle to visitors.

This second attack on the work proceeded so smoothly and at such an excellent pace that the builder was darkly discouraged and voiced superstitious prophecies.

"It has gone too well; very much too well. I do not like it. It is very strange that it has gone so well. I do not like it, indeed I do not. There will be something go wrong, now. You will see."

"Oh, come, Mr. Thomas!" said Parsons. "Every bit of the work has been tested and supervised by you and by me."

"Ah, yes, indeed," said the dark, round-headed Celt, in sombre agreement. "Tested and supervised, I promise you, but there is something strange about it, for all that. I do not speak of Say-tan, for that is a name with which I do not soil my lips, but I fear the worst. Yes, indeed I do. You will let me know how you get on."

"If he were a Catholic I think he would promise to pray for us," said Parsons, with a nervous laugh. Way back, his people had been Macphersons from Badenoch. After the '45 they had settled in Shropshire and anglicised their name, a fact of which Parsons was cognisant but not proud.

Timothy shared none of his nervousness. He was delighted to think that it should be possible to hold the next annual dinner, following the annual general meeting of Phisbe, in the Great Hall of Nanradoc, and in July he sent out—or, rather, Coningsby typed out—his invitations to the feast with, at the foot of them, an urgent "*R.S.V.P. at an early date so that catering arrangements may be made.*" As the banquet was not part of the meeting proper, which would be held in the principal lounge of the village hotel,

Timothy felt free to ask other guests. These included Marion (who refused the invitation), the builder and his wife, Pembroke and Leonie, and the hotel manager and his wife.

Timothy had made no secret of his plans, and, far from resenting a private enterprise which would provide meals in a valley where, between Betwys-y-Coed and his own place, no meal was procurable, the hotel manager had embraced the scheme with enthusiasm, seeing in it an attraction over and above the ordinary in his part of the country, and one which, although it might deplete his dining-room for one night in the week during the holiday season, was offering no kind of lodging, no breakfast, luncheon, or tea, and therefore could do his business little harm and, possibly, a great deal of good. He accepted with alacrity the invitation for himself and his wife to attend the function, and so did the builder, Pembroke, and Leonie.

Service for the banquet had looked like posing problems, but Universal Aunts had been approached a couple of months before the date which had been fixed for the feast, and, in their usual vein of near-magic, the Aunts had produced a master-chef who had spent his formative years in the kitchens of Christchurch, Oxford, and a sufficiency of kitchen-boys, kitchen-maids, assistant cooks, and table servitors to ensure that, whatever else happened, the guests would not go hungry.

It was seldom that the annual dinner produced more than about a hundred and fifty guests, even when it was held in Phisbe's London headquarters, so that Timothy was pleased when sixty persons, almost all of them members and members' wives and husbands, accepted his invitation. Not more than a couple of dozen had attended the meeting, but, by seven o'clock in the evening, the car-park, which had been levelled out and gravelled, was reasonably full, and the guests, in cheerful, party mood, were streaming towards the great hall.

Timothy, upheld by the president and flanked by Pembroke Pritchard Jones and Leonie Bing, was at the opening of the screens to receive them, and they were promised a tour of the castle as soon as the banquet was over. A low-voiced question from Timothy produced from Pembroke the information that there was still no news of his sister or of the strange couple who had tenanted Nanradoc House.

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\* *The English Medieval House*, by Margaret Wood.

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

## Knives at the Feast

Wisely or not, Timothy had decided to temper the wind to the shorn lamb by providing dry sherry as an aperitif, torches which were guaranteed to burn for a couple of hours before they began to stifle the diners with acrid smoke, a master carver at a side-table instead of allowing the guests to hack the meat for themselves, and modern steak-knives which were, at least, sharp. The medieval touch was in evidence to the extent that forks were not provided, that the platters were of wood, and that the bulk of the food consisted of meat, poultry, and game, great hunks of bread and, to end the repast, a series of elaborate open tarts and some fresh fruit. A kind of hors d'oeuvres consisting of salted herrings, cockles, mussels, and pieces of stewed eel were offered, but found few takers. There were root vegetables to accompany the meat dishes, and beer and wine were served. As well as the flaring torches in their sconces on the walls, light was provided on the tables by candles of the modern kind.

Timothy sat at the high table with the president, the treasurer, Parsons, Pembroke Jones, and the wives of these. Timothy, lacking a wife, was partnered by a famous woman columnist who had been invited because Timothy knew and liked her, and who had asked, as a condition of accepting the invitation, that she might be allowed to make notes with

a view to writing up a description of the castle and the banquet for her paper.

Timothy had chosen a night when the moon was large and bright, and had crossed his fingers for fine weather. At the end of the feasting the usual speeches were made but, by agreement, were kept short so that the tour of the castle might take place at a reasonable hour. Timothy, called upon to speak, contented himself by describing very briefly the state of the castle when the repairs were begun, and left it to his audience to see for themselves what the restoration had accomplished. It was a happily-chattering gathering which left the great hall and abandoned it to the servants who were to clear up.

Timothy waited until everybody except himself, Pembroke, Leonie, and the woman journalist had left the hall. Parsons and his wife had been among the first to go out, and his party was followed by a coterie of questioners who felt, rightly, that, as the architect-in-charge, he could tell them all that they wanted to know about the restoration.

The journalist did not keep Timothy long. She had to get back to London that same night. He gave her the details she wanted—hers, she explained, was a column of snippets, none of them longer than about one hundred and fifty words—and then she went off. Pembroke and his wife still lingered.

“Did you manage to take a look round before dinner?” Timothy enquired.

“No. We thought we’d like to walk round with you,” replied Leonie.

“I won’t be available for some time yet, I’m afraid. I have to wait until the servants have finished their jobs and then I have to pay them and make sure they all get on their motor-coach. We’ve arranged beds for them in the village, and then the coach will take them back to London tomorrow. I expect to be here for at least another hour.”

"Then we had better look round on our own, I suppose," said Leonie. "Do you know, Tim, I have an idea I saw your monk when we arrived."

"Really? Where?"

"Skulking about by that hut thing you've put up at the entrance."

"What, the ticket lodge?"

"Yes, if that's what you call it. Down there almost on to the road."

"That seems odd."

"I should imagine he knew nothing about the banquet, still less that there would be more than half a hundred people milling around."

"I don't mean that. Of course he couldn't have known. I meant it seems an odd sort of place for him to be. You'd think he'd make direct for the house. You haven't seen the woman, I suppose?"

"I wouldn't know her if I did, would I? I only knew it was the monkish creature because of the way he was dressed. There was nobody with him and he vanished before I could speak to him. I wanted to ask him about Olwen. We've advertised for her in all the papers, asking her to contact us, but no luck so far. Another thing—I'm sure that Marion was one of the waitresses at table. Didn't you spot her?"

"Marion? Oh, come now!" said Pembroke. "You must be mistaken. What would Marion be doing as a waitress?"

"Particularly as I had invited her to the do, and she refused to come," said Timothy. "They were all dolled up in thirteenth-century costume, and the women had wimples and things. None of them would be easily recognisable, especially with only torches and candles to light the place. You must be mistaken, you know."

"I might mistake a face, but a sculptor isn't likely to mistake a body, clothed or not clothed," said Leonie coldly, "and, if it *was* Marion, she was up to n.b.g., if you ask me."



Timothy thought of the night at Phisbe's headquarters and his own suspicions of Marion, and said,

"Well, I can soon find out when I check the pay-roll. Be seeing you!"

"Where is the washing-up being done? In the kitchens here?" asked Leonie.

"Yes, of course. Apart from the fact that it would be an awkward business carting all the stuff over to the house at night, we found a well."

"I fell into it once," said Pembroke. "Have you thought any more about buying the castle and the hillside? I'll throw in the woods, of course—everything down to the bridge."

"If we could get your sister's consent . . ."

"Oh, Olwen will have to consent. Anyway, I'm sure she wouldn't mind. What do you say?"

"I say that until I'm sure of a clear title, I shall go on renting from you, but I certainly shouldn't buy."

"I'm only charging a peppercorn rent, so I suppose you're taking a sensible line. If only I could get the whole of Nanradoc off my hands!"

"That will be the day," said Leonie. "Anyhow, you're saving sixty pounds a month and getting this bit from Timmy, so what's your worry?"

"Olwen. I'm sure something's happened to her. If not, why doesn't she answer our advertisements? That's my worry, and that's why I'm perfectly certain that it would be safe for Herring to buy."

"All in the future," said Timothy. "Well, I really must see how things are going, and pay these people off."

The clearing-up of the tables had been concluded and laughter and conversation were coming from behind the screens. The chef and his scullions had changed their clothes and now, with their medieval costumes packed in brown paper and stacked in the buttery, were only waiting for their pay. The washing-up was done in water previously brought from the well and heated in the newly-constructed

“medieval” kitchen. Nothing but a wooden platter, a cup to drink from, and a knife had been issued to each diner, and, apart from these, there were only the enormous dishes and the pots, pans, and turning-spit to be dealt with.

The rest of the helpers had changed their clothes before they had begun to tackle their task of clearing up. Timothy paid them off as they finished their work, adding a generous tip to each wage-packet, and then, in the brilliant moonlight, saw them off. He had no wage-packet left over, and none of the girls resembled Marion. There was only one disconsolate voice. It came from a kitchen-maid.

“Please, sir,” she said, “didn’t you say as there was sixty ladies and gents at dinner? Well, I on’y counted forty-seven knives as come out to be washed and wiped.”

“Everything that was left on the tables was brought out here, Mr. Herring,” said the head waiter. “I inspected the tables myself.”

“Some of the knives might have got lost in the straw on the floor, sir,” said a waitress. “Some of the ladies and gentlemen was having a rare old time chucking down their chicken-bones, and the like, under the table, I noticed.”

“I’m getting a couple of men from the village to come in and clean up the floor tomorrow,” said Timothy, “so I daresay the knives will turn up, unless, of course, people are keeping them as souvenirs. Mind how you go on that winding stair. Feel your way carefully, won’t you?”

Having seen the last of his helpers, he went back into the hall, where the torches had almost burnt themselves out, and kicked about among the straw. He found nothing in the form of a knife, so he blew out the candles and then, coughing a little in the smoky atmosphere, he groped his way to the newel staircase and felt cautiously for the wall.

He made a slow, groping but safe descent and was glad to find himself out in the moonlight. People were already beginning to drift back to their cars, although an insatiable little band was still gathered at the entrance to the keep,

eagerly putting questions to Parsons. Timothy joined them and was eagerly questioned in his turn. At last he and Parsons were left alone.

"Well?" asked Timothy.

"All the earmarks of a success, I think. Everybody seems to have got quite a kick out of it. One or two suggested making it an annual affair, with a subscription next time, of course, and the Society and their guests also to be in fancy dress."

"Whether they got a kick out of it or not," said Timothy, "thirteen of 'em got a steak-knife out of it."

"You don't say! The miserable jackdaws! I can't understand people's morals. Anything portable seems to be anybody's property nowadays. Well, we seem to be the last. Better make sure those torches have burnt themselves out. Diana got tired and has gone to sit in the car."

They were not the last to leave. As they came out from the hall, having coughed their way round the walls and inspected the burnt-out torches by the light of an electric one which Parsons had had the forethought to bring with him, they encountered Leonie.

"I say," she said, "you haven't seen Pembroke, have you? He left me to go into the bushes, and I strolled on down to the bridge, but, although I called to him on my way back, he didn't answer, so I concluded he had gone off to have a look at the castle on his own, but I couldn't find him. I went down to the car to see whether he'd got fed up and had parked himself there, but he hadn't. Then I climbed to the top of the keep, but he wasn't up there, either. I can't think where he has got to, and I want to go home. He *is* a nuisance, really!"

"How long since you went to the car?" asked Timothy.

"Oh, I don't know. About twenty minutes, I should think."

"He probably missed you somehow, and is now in the car, cursing you for hanging about. Let's go and see."

There was only one car left in the car-park. It was Parsons's, in which Timothy had been brought to the castle, leaving his own car in Parsons's garage in Shrewsbury.

"Well, really!" exclaimed Leonie. "What on earth does he think he's up to! He's gone off in the car and left me stranded!"

"Did you have a row?" asked Timothy. "Has he gone off in a spat, do you think?"

"I don't know what to think. Yes, we did have a bit of a toss-up, but nothing worse than usual, if you know what I mean."

"Oh, well, plenty of room for one more in my car," said Parsons. "I'll drive you home. It isn't far, and we've the rest of the night before us. Hop in, and let's go, shall we?"

"It isn't like Pembroke," said Leonie tremulously. "We fight pretty often, but it's always all right. Don't you think perhaps he may have taken the car and gone to the hotel for a drink? I hadn't thought of it, but, ten to one, that's the answer."

"Could be," said Timothy, "but he ought to have let you know. Would he have had time to get a drink, though, at the hotel? I expect they keep pub hours, except for residents, you know."

"Pembroke can wangle anything," said Leonie, "so I expect the hotel is the answer. I suppose you wouldn't take me there?"

Timothy raised his eyebrows. Parsons nodded.

"Of course," he said. "We can't leave you marooned here. Hop in. We'll soon catch up with him." Half a mile from Nanradoc, Parsons's headlights picked out a car parked on the grass verge between a broad ditch and the road. It was on the left-hand side, facing towards the village.

"Somebody in trouble," said Timothy. Parsons pulled up.

"Better find out whether he wants any help," he said. The road through the Pass was a lonely one and the time was close on midnight. He got out. As Timothy, who had

been seated next to him, opened the nearside front door, Leonie exclaimed,

“Good heavens! That looks like our car!” She joined the two men. The abandoned car was empty and uninjured. Leonie called Pembroke’s name. There was no response, so Timothy tried. Then Parsons bellowed out the name of Jones.

“Are you sure it’s your car?” asked Timothy, when nothing happened after ten minutes of lung-bursting shouting had failed. Parsons shone his torch on the number-plates.

“Of course I’m sure. Whatever can he be doing?” Leonie exclaimed.

“Run out of juice,” suggested Parsons.

“He can’t have done. The tank was full when we started out from Mold. We’ve not done more than fifty miles.”

“Mind if I have a look?” He ascertained that there was plenty of petrol in the tank and that the tyres were intact. “Well, there must be something wrong somewhere,” he said, “but, if so, you’d think he’d walk back to the castle and find us, not go on to the village. That’s a much longer walk, and, likely enough, no help to be got there at this time of night, anyway.”

“Perhaps he did walk back and, somehow, missed us,” said Timothy. “Tell you what. Suppose you three drive on to the village and ask for him at the hotel, while I walk back to the castle and yell for him there? One way or the other, we’re bound to locate him. Whichever it is, you can pick me up at Nanradoc on your way back. By the way, is Jones’s car locked? Try the door, Leonie, will you?”

“Yes, it *is* locked,” she said, when she had tried it, “but I’ve got a key.” She produced it from her handbag and in another moment she was in the driver’s seat and had started the engine. “Nothing wrong there,” she said, when she had switched it off. “Perhaps it’s the brakes or something.” She re-locked the car. “I suppose, Tim, you wouldn’t care to—?”

“Yes, I’ll try it out,” said Timothy. “You might lend me your torch, Tom. You won’t need it at the hotel. Oh, thanks! So long, then. See you soon.” He drove back briskly along the way they had come, but wondered, as he covered the half-mile back to Nanradoc, what madness could have taken possession of Pembroke Jones. Many artists, painters in particular, had the name for being unpredictable, fickle, zany, and irresponsible, but to go off in his own car without a word to his wife, leave it abandoned and locked by the roadside, and not to be within call, seemed extraordinary by any standards of improbability. Timothy parked, turning over in his mind the events of the evening, trivial though they had been. He was pretty sure he knew the party which had kept his expensive steak-knives as souvenirs. They were not members of Phisbe, but were the sons and the sons’ friends of members. The stealing of souvenirs—ashtrays from the saloon bars of pubs, face-towels from hotels, signs indicating a direction to a public lavatory, road signs, notices in foreign hotels—was considered fair game by a moronic circle of young people, therefore the theft of the steak-knives was understandable, if not excusable. The dramatic disappearance of Pembroke Pritchard Jones was neither.

The moon has risen at about half-past seven and would not set until half-way through the morning, so, in a cloudless sky, it was still shining brightly. The keep of Nanradoc rose starkly out of the hillside and the great hall was a menacing hulk to the left of it. Timothy stood in the ruined gatehouse, which was now little more than an archway in the curtain wall, and yelled for Jones. It was both eerie and ridiculous to stand among the ruins at midnight shouting his head off and receiving no answer. What was even more ridiculous, he felt, was that he shrank from exploring the ruins. He had the fantastic fear that at any moment the monk, like some enormous, evil, black-feathered bird of prey, would come flapping and hopping at him from one of the dark doorways.

“How puerile can you get?” he asked himself angrily, and, with that, he crossed over to the small keep and switched on Parsons’s powerful torch.

There was nobody in the keep, but he noticed the deep depression in the floor and it reminded him that, so far, they had not dug out the well which, he had no doubt, had at some time been sunk in the flooring.

“Have to see about that,” he said aloud, and the sound of his own voice startled him so much that, to drown his fears, he called Jones’s name again and again, until the narrow place re-echoed. There was no reply, and he tried the great hall and the little chapel with no better result.

“Last seen entering the bushes in response to a call of nature,” he muttered. “Can he have been taken ill there? No. He drove the car half a mile down the road. All the same . . .” He followed the narrow path which led to the bridge over the river, flashing his torch and alternately calling and listening. He did not expect anything to come of this, and was startled and astonished when, from the woods on his left, he distinctly heard a groan. “Jones! Jones! Where are you?” he cried.

Another groan was the answer. Timothy thought he had located it, and this was so. The torch picked out a small thicket and, extending beyond it, a pair of shoes. Westward of these lay the rest of Jones. He was lying sprawled out, face downwards, and the haft of a knife was sticking out above his shoulder blades.

“Just as well for you, sir, that it was such a short-bladed knife and that you weren’t on a diet,” said a large and cheerful detective-sergeant a day or two later. “It’s a great thing to have plenty of flesh on your bones when jokers start playing with knives. The surgeons tell me another quarter of an inch to the left and a bit lower down, and you’d be having flowers on your coffin instead of at your

bedside. Now, sir, they say you're well enough to be questioned, so what can you tell us about all this?"

"Damn-all," said Pembroke. "All I can think is that some joker, as you say, was playing with knives. I had just unzipped my trousers when—bing!—the perisher had punctured me."

"And that's really all you can say, sir?"

"Absolutely all."

"Have you any enemies?"

"Good Lord, yes! Of course I have. Who hasn't? But none of them would pink me."

"Did you have words with anybody at this dinner-party? It was rather an odd sort of party, so I gathered from your wife and the gentleman who found you."

"It was a bit out of the ordinary, perhaps, but I wouldn't call it odd. You make it sound improper. It wasn't any kind of orgy, if that's what you think. It was simply an attempt, and, to my mind, not too clever a one, to recreate the atmosphere of a medieval banquet. You know—straw on the floor, one platter, one knife, and chuck the bones and the bits of gristle under the table."

"But it was well-behaved, so far as you know, sir?"

"Oh, yes. Mind you, there was one group of young idiots who'd tanked up, I fancy, before they arrived, but, apart from a lot of noise and some bread-throwing—that sort of thing—I didn't notice any dirty work on their part."

"Thirteen knives were pocketed, sir."

"And one of them was planted in my back?"

"That's so, sir. We've accounted for the other twelve."

"The devil you have! Well, what do you know!"

"What we don't know, sir, and what we have to find out, is who took the thirteenth."

"Yes, quite a point, that. Well, I'm afraid I can't help you, and that isn't to say I wouldn't if I could. I'd very much like to know who the blighter is who tried to give me my quietus with a bare bodkin."



"I understand your wife was with you just before you retired into the bushes, sir. Did you notice anybody else?"

"Nobody. People were milling about all over the show, looking at the ruins and so forth. All I can think is that I must have surprised a courting couple and the chap took umbrage—something of that sort. Don't you think so?"

"Could be, sir, but you say you didn't actually see anyone?"

"I certainly didn't. Didn't hear anyone, either, come to that, except the voices of lots of people round about the castle. I certainly didn't hear anyone in the woods, but, then, I wasn't expecting to, you know."

"Your wife mentioned two people whom she was surprised to see at the castle. Would you know anything about that?"

"I know whom she means, but I didn't notice either of them. You're referring to a cousin of mine and to a rather odd bod who goes about as a caricature of a monk. Personally, I think my wife was seeing double. She's been suspicious of my cousin Marion ever since Marion wanted to make her home with us. As for the monk, well, unless he had changed into civvies, he certainly wasn't at the dinner-table."

"Is it true, sir, that, if you were out of the way, this cousin would inherit a considerable property?"

"Not unless my sister, who is co-owner with me, was out of the way, too."

"Your sister was not at the function, I believe, sir? Your wife made no mention of a sister to us."

"We have no idea where my sister is. I would very much like to find out. When you've tracked down my funny circus-performer, perhaps you'd oblige me by throwing out a dragnet for her. I'm extremely worried about her."

"If you were out of the way, your sister, I suppose, would be the sole owner of your property, would she, sir? Or would it go to your wife?"

“Oh, it would have nothing to do with my wife. Apart from myself and my sister, the only person with any interest in the estate is this cousin of mine, apart from my baby daughter.”

“Your wife thought this religious gentleman might have something to gain, sir.”

“Nothing but squatter’s rights.”

“Could you explain that?”

Pembroke gave a succinct account of what little he knew of the tenancy of the trousered woman and the monk. At the end of it the detective-sergeant nodded and flipped back the pages of his notebook.

“That tallies with what Mr. Timothy Francis Herring has told us,” he said. “We like to cross-check when we can. Mr. Herring also alleges that the man is some kind of maniac who breaks into houses, throws furniture about, and climbs on roofs. Can you substantiate that, sir?”

“Of my own knowledge, no. Herring has mentioned it to me, of course, but I have no first-hand information about the chap. In fact, it’s only from Herring that I know of the fellow and his woman at all, and that they were squatting at Nanradoc, but I jolly well hope you find them, and then you might ask them what they’ve done with my sister. Anything more I can tell you?”

“Not at present, thank you, sir. That’s the lot, so far as you are concerned. We are checking on everybody who was at the dinner, of course, including the domestic staff. In fact, we had a pretty good go at some of them to fill in the time before the surgeons would let us question you. Good day, sir, and I wish you a speedy recovery. We shall be keeping in touch.”

# CHAPTER FIFTEEN

## Pussy in the Well

The twelve steak-knives which had been appropriated by a party of the younger guests were recovered easily enough and were duly returned to their owner. The thirteenth, which had been taken out of Pembroke's body, was retained by the police to be produced at the trial (if trial there was) of the would-be murderer.

"Of course, sir," said the detective-sergeant, "we have no means of knowing, at present, whether one of the parties might not have got hold of *two* knives, one of which is in the bundle I've returned to you, and the other of which we are holding as an exhibit when we catch the criminal and bring him to book."

It was a point which had not occurred to Timothy.

"I shouldn't think it was possible for one person to get hold of *two* knives, you know," he said. "I suppose the waiter knew from which places the twelve knives were missing."

"Just so, sir. They were all from the one part of one of the long tables, and your seating-plan gave us the names and your young man at your London office found the addresses for us. It was as simple as that. But I'm afraid we've got a long row to hoe before we can fix on the party that had the thirteenth knife."

"Of course," said Timothy to Parsons, with whom he was staying so that he could visit Pembroke while the other was

in hospital, “if I didn’t know that they’re still very much in love with one another, I wouldn’t look further than Leonie Bing. I mean, look at the facts, so far as we know them. Nobody else would have known that Jones went into those bushes.”

“Yes, quite,” said Parsons in a dubious tone. “He did or said something annoying, you mean, and his incensed wife buried the knife in him and as near as a toucher rendered herself a widow. It *sounds* all right, and I suppose it’s logical enough, but, damn it all, you might as well argue that Diana here is capable of sticking a knife in *me!*”

“Which she jolly well is, at times,” said his wife, “so don’t say you haven’t been warned.”

“Well, carry the warning one step further,” urged Parsons, grinning. “Which, among my many irritating habits, is the one that, in the interests of my own safety, I ought to give up?”

“Your attack of conscience every Christmas when you think we ought to ask your sister-in-law to live with us. I would *willingly* murder you if you ever went the one step further, and actually invited her to make her home here. *I could not stand it*, so now you know!”

“I think she’s pretty lonely. I feel rather sorry for her since Richard died.”

“Since she nagged him into his grave, you mean.”

Timothy looked thoughtfully at his hostess.

“Tell me, huntress chaste and fair,” he said, “would a housewife, who is also a dedicated artist, be visited by murderous intentions at the thought of having home and studio permanently requisitioned by a spinster cousin-in-law and three small brats?”

Diana raised her eyebrows.

“I’ve known slighter reasons for being visited by murderous intentions,” she replied.

“So *that’s* what you think?” said Parsons. “Oh, but to have the intention is one thing; to carry it out is something

quite different. I can imagine Leonie Bing *leaving* Jones, but I certainly can't imagine her trying to *kill* him."

"I don't know so much. Pretty hot stuff, these sculptors. But to turn to more important matters. First, when are we going to get people to dig up the floor of the keep at Nanradoc to find out whether there's another well?"

"Whenever you like. Isn't there some electrical gadget called a proton magnetometer that archaeologists use? You'd better make some enquiries."

"It might be more practical to employ a dowser first. We don't want to dig out a blinking great hole that's simply got to be filled in again. Besides, there might be a third well somewhere in the bailey. A dowser could find that, too."

"Rather fun. I know there's a British Society of Dowsers somewhere about. We'll get them to send someone down. What other 'important matters' have you thought of?"

"I've had a letter from the president, who's had a letter from Coningsby, to say that the Dewes couple have threatened to give notice if Marion Jones and her kids are to be permanent lodgers at our headquarters. There are still these furniture-throwing noises at night, and the couple are properly cheesed off."

"Oh, Lord! We can't possibly lose the Dewes! What's the trouble this time?—anything apart from the noisy kids?"

"The police."

"Oh, questioning Marion about the Nanradoc banquet, I suppose. But *she* can't know anything about the attempt on Jones. Didn't you say she refused the invitation to be present?"

"The deuce of it is that Leonie Bing still swears she saw her there. All absolute nonsense, of course, but unless Marion has a pretty good alibi she's in for a sticky time, I rather fear. You see, unfortunately, she might have a motive for getting Jones out of the way."

"Oh, of course! This third-party title to the Nanradoc estate, you mean. Yes, that *is* a bit of a facer. Let's hope, for

her sake, she can prove she was blamelessly occupied in London while somebody was pricking Jones with a stiletto. How is he, by the way?"

"He's out of the wood now. He'll be able to go home in a few days' time, he tells me, so, as soon as I've seen to the dowsers and diggers . . ."

"I'll do that, if you want to get back to Town to see Dewes and Marion. I think prompt action needs to be taken there."

"I do agree. All right, and thanks very much. I'll send the president a wire—he seems to think that smoothing and soothing the Dewes is by way of being my pigeon—and I'll get back to London tomorrow."

He found Marion alone, unhappy, but resigned. The children had been taken into Kensington Gardens to play, as it was Saturday, and she had left them there for an hour.

"I don't blame Mrs. Dewes," she said. "It isn't very nice to have visits from the police, and we've had three. I don't know why I have to be mixed up in this stabbing business. I wasn't even *at* Nanradoc that night."

"Well, surely you can prove that, can't you?"

"No, as it happens—as it *would* happen, with *my* sort of luck!—I can't. I go to cookery classes as a rule on Wednesdays, but on that particular Wednesday I didn't go."

"Oh? How was that, then?"

"We were going to do the main dishes—the entree and game, you know—of a seven-course dinner, and I simply couldn't afford the stuff. The week before that, we'd done hors d'oeuvres, soup, and fish—that was bad enough; the soup took sherry and the fish was Dover soles—but that particular night it was to be fillet steak and pheasant, and I simply couldn't run to it, so I ducked the class."

"But the Dewes could have said you were here all the evening, couldn't they?"

"No, because I wasn't. You see, I have an agreement with Mrs. Dewes that she will pop upstairs once or twice

during the evening to make sure the children are all right—I give her half-a-crown a week for that—so I didn't tell her I wasn't going to class, because it's my only free evening of the week. I went out at the usual time, and walked about a bit, and went to a News Theatre and saw the whole programme through twice, and then I walked about a bit more and then I bought a ticket on the Inner Circle and used up the rest of the time that way, and then I went home. I don't see how I can prove any of it. I've told the police what I did, but I know they don't believe me. Who on earth can have told them I went to Nanradoc?"

"I believe Leonie Bing let it slip that she thought she had seen you there."

"Does she hate me, then?"

"I'm sure she doesn't. She meant no harm, but, of course, the police think that you have a stronger motive than anybody else for putting Pembroke out of the way."

"Yes, I realise that. The police have questioned the Dewes about me, too, and, of course, more came out about that awful monk coming here."

"I see. By the way, how did he get on for food while he was here? He couldn't have gone out to buy any, and he must have been hiding in the house for the best part of three days."

"He stole from me. I thought it was Bryn and Bron."

"Oh, of course he had the run of the top floors during school hours."

"Yes. Tim, what am I going to do?"

"Don't worry. We'll work something out. You can't stay here, of course."

"You think the Dewes mean that they'll go if I stay? That's what Mrs. Dewes told me. She's dreadfully upset about these visits from the police, and we're still getting those very disturbing noises."

"So I understand. And I'm afraid they do mean it, and Phisbe can't afford to lose them. They've been with us for

fifteen years, I believe. They were already in institution when I joined the Society seven long summers ago."

"Yes, I do understand, but it doesn't make it any easier."

"Well, I got you into this, and I'm going to see you through, so not to worry. Get your own and the kids' things packed. We can deal with your furniture later. For the time being, I've taken rooms for you in a guesthouse near Ealing Common. You can get the train from there to take you to school, can't you? The proprietor and his wife are retired teachers and are prepared to welcome the children and see them settled in at a local school. How will that do? Permanent arrangements to be made later."

"Oh, Tim!" He found his arms full of a sobbing girl. It was not unpleasant. He led her to a chair and pulled her on to his knee.

Coningsby was congratulatory, Mrs. Dewes apologetic, when Timothy informed both of them on the following day that Marion's furniture would be collected and put into storage.

"I'm sure, sir, as I'm very sorry to be the cause of her going," said Mrs. Dewes, "but it was them visits from the police, and always one of 'em in uniform, and what people must have thought I *can't* think."

"Well, there it is," said Timothy curtly. He was not feeling very pleased with the Phisbe caretakers. Marion and the children could not live indefinitely at a guesthouse, particularly as she insisted that she ought to pay half what it cost to keep them there, a sum which he knew was more than she could afford, and which he was determined not to let her in for if he could help it. He met her on the following Saturday and drove her round to look at flats, bungalows, and houses, but there seemed to be nothing within her means and she flared up so angrily when he offered her the purchase price of one of the flats that he felt bound to apologise and withdraw the offer.



“I feel like a kept woman, as it is, with you paying the money for us in Ealing,” she said. “I suppose the only answer is a caravan. Do they sell them on the instalment plan, I wonder?”

Timothy returned to his Cotswold home, and Marion’s problems soon ceased to occupy his mind, for in the middle of the following week he received a most disquieting letter from Parsons. The hollow in the floor of the keep at Nanradoc had indeed indicated a filled-in well, but, in digging it out, the men had come upon a horrid discovery. Near the bottom of the well they had found a body.

“Could you come up here and support my story?” wrote Parsons. “Of course the men reported it to the police, the police called in a pathologist, (one of these forensic experts, you know), and it turns out that the body could not have been buried more than a few years ago. Murder is suspected, of course, and I’ve been pretty well grilled by the gendarmes as to my object in having the thing disinterred. They don’t suspect me of having made away with anybody, but they waste my time and, anyway, I can tell them almost nothing that seems of the least use.”

Timothy did not see that anything he could say would be of much use, either, but he could hardly leave Parsons, who had supervised the digging merely to oblige him, to carry the can, so he telephoned to say that he was coming and, as the letter had arrived by the morning post, he drove to Gloucester and on to Hereford and through Ludlow to Shrewsbury that same day.

Tom and Diana were delighted to see him, and on the following morning he drove to the police station at Caernarvon and reported. They found him more helpful than he had supposed they would—at any rate, they told him that his statement had cleared matters up so far as Parsons was concerned. They also told him that they had been in contact with Pembroke Jones and, having said that, they proceeded to question him so closely that he guessed they

were checking his statements against those which Jones had given them.

"How did you come to rent Nanradoc Castle in the first place? What brought you to it? Why did you think there was a well under the floor of the tower? When did you hear that Mr. Jones's sister was missing?"

In answer to the last question Timothy mildly observed that he had not heard that Miss Olwen Jones was "missing." All he knew was that at one time she had been residing at Nanradoc House, but was no longer there. He had reason to believe that she had let it.

"To whom? Can you describe the people? What made you go to the house? Why did they give you a key to the bridge? Were you alone when they gave it to you? Oh, what made you take this other Miss Jones with you, then?"

Timothy decided to hedge on this one. Once the police were certain—as they probably were already—that the body was that of Pembroke's sister, Marion would be even more deeply in the soup than she had been over the stabbing of Pembroke, since, if both the brother and the sister died, her claim to the estate would be unquestioned except for little Miranda. Sooner or later she was bound to be seriously involved, but Timothy was determined that it should not be through any ill-timed words of his if he could possibly help it.

"I didn't intend to take her to see the house. I thought she might be interested to see the castle, as her cousin had promised it to her if she would repair it."

"But you did take her up to the house."

"Yes, I did, but it was quite an afterthought. When we had looked at the ruins it occurred to me that she might be interested in having a look at the house. After all, it was her ancestral home, I suppose."

"Yes, I see that, sir, but what exactly was *your* interest in *her*?"

That was an easy one, and Timothy answered it confidently.

"She had been offered this castle by her cousin, as I said. She wrote to my Society to find out whether we could help her financially about putting the place into some sort of repair. Of course, we couldn't, but I felt rather sorry for her, so I took her along to show her how hopeless it was."

"Not so entirely hopeless, sir, if you later decided to effect the repairs, surely?"

"That was an entirely different matter. The repairs are sufficient to turn the castle into a show-place for tourists, but Miss Marion Jones wanted it for a dwelling-house. It is quite unsuitable for that."

"So, realising its unsuitability, you took her up to the house."

"Yes."

"Did you expect to be shown over it?"

"I didn't expect anything."

"*Did* you go inside?"

"Yes. The people who were living there asked us in and offered us tea."

"What people would those have been?"

"A middle-aged, rather mannish type of woman who called herself Olwen Jones, and a chap dressed like a monk. You must have heard of them from people in the village. They were quite a remarkable-looking couple."

"You say they invited you and Miss Jones in, and offered you tea. Had you met them on any other occasion, then?"

"Yes. I had run into them on a previous visit I had paid to the ruins after my Society had received Miss Marion Jones's letter. They handed me a key to the bridge so that I could cross the river. That was how I was able to take Miss Jones up to the house."

"Yes. Did you meet these people again?"

"The monkish chap, yes, but not the lady. He got into our London headquarters for some reason known only to himself, and I chased him on to the roof after he had knocked me cold with a poker. The police in Kensington

have the details, although, as I couldn't prove the assault, I didn't mention it."

"What was his object in entering your Society's premises, sir?"

"I didn't get a chance to ask him, and I don't suppose he would have told me, anyway. I formed the impression that there was something fishy about his tenancy of Nanradoc House and that he thought we might be holding the deeds, or something of that sort."

"His object, you think, was burglary, then?"

"Yes, burglary of a sort."

"You mentioned the London police. How did they become involved?"

"Somebody called them and told them this chap was on the roof."

"Did you charge him with breaking and entering? You say you did not charge him with assaulting you."

"No. I had no proof that he was the person who had hit me over the head, and, actually, I thought him some kind of a crank."

"A very liberal attitude, if I may say so, sir."

Timothy smiled at the irony and said,

"'Live and let live' is my motto, sergeant. It saves a lot of unpleasantness."

"Could I have the address of your Society's premises, sir?"

Timothy gave it, and added,

"There's nobody there during the day except our secretary, who has the downstairs office, and the caretaker's wife, who does the cleaning. At night she and her husband look after the place. I don't think you'll find them much help. So far as I know, neither of them even saw the monk. And now, may I ask *you* a question?"

"Ask away, sir," replied the sergeant, with a secretive, Welsh smile. "There is no harm in asking, but I shall answer only at my own discretion, of course."

"This body my men found in the well. Has it been identified?"

"Not positively, no, sir, but we have Mr. Pembroke Pritchard Jones at the mortuary at this very moment. And now, sir, can you give me Miss Marion Jones's address?"

"Marion's address? But she has nothing to tell you about this wretched business of a body in the well! Except for a couple of visits to Nanradoc House, she's been living in London all the time. She's a teacher. You can ask at her school. They'll tell you where she's been living."

"There are such tilings as school holidays, sir, and there are such things as Saturdays and Sundays. I may tell you that we have not yet concluded our enquiries into the attack, murderously conceived, on Mr. Pembroke Pritchard Jones."

"I'll lay you a bet on that, sergeant."

"I do not accept wagers under any circumstances whatever, Mr. Herring. Apart from my being a member of the police force, my chapel does not countenance any form of gambling."

"My apologies, sergeant. I respect your attitude."

"If you have any information to give which will help us in our enquiries, it is your duty as a citizen to place it at our disposal."

"It isn't information, it's a hunch. Do you read P. G. Wodehouse, sergeant?"

"No, sir. He comes under the heading of light literature, and I prefer my reading to be purposeful."

"Oh, then you won't have met Jeeves and his preoccupation with the psychology of the individual."

"No, sir, and I fail to perceive what bearing, if any, Mr. Wodehouse's books will have upon the matter under review."

"What I said. The psychology of the individual. You will find, if you probe deeply enough, that poor old Pembroke was stabbed by the wife of his bosom as the upshot, or final

word, in a domestic fracas or set-to. And I don't suppose for a single instant that she wished to do more than to remind him that an Englishwoman's home is her castle."

"Sir?"

"Pembroke, who, like all artists, is a law unto himself and has no consideration whatever for the feelings of others, had mooted a scheme for introducing into his home his own small daughter and her twin cousins, and was also, I believe, prepared to offer sanctuary to Miss Marion Jones. I deduce, therefore, that Mrs. Pembroke's action in piercing her spouse with one of my steak-knives was merely in the nature of a gentle and timely rebuke, and an indication of her dissatisfaction with these plans."

"But, sir, the act was premeditated. Why else would she have purloined your knife?"

"Why did twelve other jokers purloin my knives? Souvenir-hunting is one of the curses of this misguided age."

"I admit that you have a point there, sir. But the wound stopped short of Mr. Jones's heart by only a fraction of an inch, remember."

"A fraction of an inch for which I'm certain Mrs. Pembroke will have allowed. There can't be much that a sculptor doesn't know about the human torso. Having given Pembroke the jolt of his life, she will confess to him, get a tanning (I hope), and Pembroke will call off the hunt and refuse to press charges. He will also drop Marion Jones like something red-hot. You'll see I'm right, if you live long enough. And now, if there's nothing further, I'd like to get back and have some lunch. Thanks for the talk. I've enjoyed it."

# CHAPTER SIXTEEN

## After the Inquest

"So there's no doubt about it," said Timothy to Parsons, who had attended the inquest on the remains found in the well.

"I didn't see how there could be."

"No. According to Droit, who did the autopsy, the remains were human and of the female sex. The height was about right, allowing for the absence of flesh-pads on the soles and heels, and so forth, and the age of the bones corresponds with the evidence of Olwen Jones's birth-certificate. There was enough hair left to give some idea of the woman's colouring, and the dental work corresponds with her dentist's records. There were no occupational marks or scars, (another thing these forensic fellows look for), but there was plenty of evidence of the accident which rendered Olwen Jones completely lame from the age of about twenty-five."

"So the verdict is murder."

"Well, it had to be, otherwise why should anybody have buried the body in the well?"

"I suppose the police will soon pick up those two beauties?"

"If you mean Father Ignatius and the woman who also calls herself Olwen Jones, there's no need. They've come forward."

"What!"

"Indeed they have. I had it from Leonie Bing, who knows the Chief Constable. The papers haven't got hold of it yet—or, if they have, they've been told to shelve it for the present—but your two beauties put in an appearance at Caernarvon and offered to give any help in their power."

"Well, I'm damned!"

"I should think *they* will be. I mean, I agree with you that they must be guilty. Unfortunately, there's another suspect."

"Not Marion?"

"Well, she's rather put herself in the picture, you know. I mean, to face the extremely awkward facts, whereas this precious couple are the *likeliest* people to have put Olwen Jones out of the way, Marion had a far stronger motive."

"Not while little Miranda is alive, you know. Besides, to have a motive for murdering someone doesn't necessarily mean that you *do* murder him. Did it come out at the inquest . . ."

"How the job was done? Oh, yes, these Keith Simpson types are nothing if not thoroughly painstaking. She'd been well and truly coshed, and more than one blow had been struck. The bones of the head showed all that."

"But a girl like Marion wouldn't . . ." Timothy stopped short. The picture of a heavy iron poker lying across a bed came before his mind's eye, and memory repeated in his ears a girl's hysterical cry, *Please don't come upstairs!*

"Are you sure she wouldn't?" Parsons asked. "She had a good deal to gain, you know. Pembroke, I'm sure, would have let her have the house to live in. Besides, there was that attack—that murderous attack—on Pembroke on the night of the medieval banquet. If both he and his sister were out of the way, the whole of the Nanradoc estate would come to Marion automatically."

"Not, as I say, while Jones's baby daughter was alive."

"No," said Parsons, giving Timothy a very significant look, "*not while Jones's baby daughter was alive*. And if



Marion Jones had managed to put Jones out with that steak-knife, how long do you suppose Jones's baby daughter *would* have remained alive, eh? Oh, don't look so frantic. I'm acting as devil's advocate, that's all. These are facts which have to be faced, and I'm afraid that, sooner or later, your Marion will be called upon to face them."

"Don't call her *my* Marion. She means nothing to me in that way. All the same, I'd better go and see her, I think."

"Take my advice, and stay clear. There's nothing you can do to help her at this juncture."

"Isn't there? That's what *you* think. Let's look on the other side of the picture. Suppose that Marion *did* do for Olwen. You don't mean to tell me that the police are going to believe she buried her in that well? How could she have done that?"

"She couldn't. At least, I can see it would be very unlikely that she could have filled in the well afterwards, although there's no doubt she could have pitched the body into it."

"But the well *was* filled in."

"I've no doubt that Father Ignatius and his friend will have a story to cover that fact. We mustn't underestimate them. They're as wide as a church door and not half as well-meaning. They filled it in, of course."

"Where's the baby now, I wonder?"

"Miranda? Back with her parents, I hope. If you're going to contact Marion you'll be able to find out, won't you? You know, Tim, it doesn't add up. I mean, apart from being able to live at Nanradoc House rent-free, what had that pair to gain by slaughtering Olwen Jones and having a go at Pembroke?"

"I don't know." Timothy spoke gloomily. "There must be more to it than meets the eye. All the same . . ."

"All the same, you're not going to believe that Marion's guilty. Obstinate old son of a gun, aren't you?"

"Well, do *you* think she did it? There's no proof that she even knew Nanradoc existed until she heard of it from Jones."

"Oh, come, now, Tim! That can't be true. They're cousins. She'd have known about the family estate."

"She said she hadn't met Jones since she was a small kid, and had never, so far as she knew, met Olwen. And that makes sense, doesn't it?"

"No, it doesn't. If she met Jones, she would have met Olwen at the same time. It stands to reason."

"Oh, nonsense! She'd have remembered, I'm sure."

"If she murdered Olwen, she'd also lie about her. (I'm still only acting as devil's advocate). I *don't* believe she did it, but it's reasonable to look on all sides."

"But you're not being reasonable, Tom. There's Miranda to consider."

"Ah, but that's just the point. It's quite possible—indeed, it's highly probable—that at the time when Olwen was killed, Miranda wasn't born. Miranda is only two years old, I think you said, and, according to the medical evidence at the inquest, Olwen would have been dead longer than that."

"And Pembroke and Leonie didn't really intend to have children. They slipped up over Miranda. Yes, I see," said Timothy. "So, if the police take the line you've indicated, there's a case, and a strong one, against Marion. They'll have to show that Marion made that attack on Pembroke, though, if it's to hold water."

The next step was a cry of despair in the form of a letter from Marion herself. It was waiting for Timothy when he returned to his Cotswold home, and had been delivered on the previous morning. The police had been to the boarding-house where she and the children were staying and, in consequence, she had been asked to leave.

"Of course, it's fair enough. The woman has her living to earn, and the sort of people who live in these parts are going to take a very dim view of a house which is visited by

the police," she wrote. "We've no option but to get out, and I'm at my wits' end. If only I'd never heard of Nanradoc . . ."

"But you must have heard of it long before you said you did," thought Timothy, remembering Tom Parsons's arguments, and raising his eyes for a moment from the letter.

". . . I shouldn't be in such a mess now. The police asked all sorts of questions, some of which I couldn't really answer. Surely they can't think I had anything to do with Olwen's death?"

"But that's just what they do think," Timothy pointed out, when he drove over to see her. "But, before we go any further, there are two things you must do. First, whether they like it or not, Miranda must be returned to her parents."

"Oh, Tim, why? If my household *must* be made smaller, I'd rather part with Bryn and Bron than with her. Besides, she's so little, she'd never understand if I let her go to strangers."

"I know it's hard, Marion, but I don't see that you have any choice. If anything were to happen to that little girl while she's still in your charge, you'd be up against it with a vengeance. Don't you see that? It's no good arguing. Until this beastly business is completely cleared up you must put the kid back where she belongs, and that's with Pembroke Jones and Leonie Bing."

"They may not be willing to have her."

"Oh, yes, they will. They've jolly well got to have her. Now to the rest of your affairs."

"I'm worried sick, Tim. Wherever we go, it will be the same tale while this police questioning is going on."

"There is just one place where it won't be the same tale, and that's in my own house. You'll have to camp there for a bit, and, at risk of sounding unchivalrous, I'm bound to say that I hope it won't be for long."

"In *your* house? Oh, but, Tim, what will your neighbours say?"

"I haven't any. My place used to be a posting inn. It's at the top of a long hill, with a village on either side in each valley. I'm miles from anywhere. That's why I bought the place. I can always come up to town, or have people to stay when I'm in need of company, otherwise, except for the servants, I'm on my own. You may find it dull, but at least, if the police descend on you, you can be badgered without the risk of being chucked out."

She did not cry, or cast herself into his arms, this time. She sat and gazed at him, and for a full minute she did not say a word. When she did speak, it was to say:

"I've brought enough trouble on you. I'll give myself up, tell them I did it, and let them send me to prison. I shan't be badgered there, either."

"Oh, don't be a little fathead!" said Timothy, vexed. "What would be the use of your saying you did it, when, in no time, they'll find proof that you didn't! All you'd get is just the kind of notoriety that, particularly in your job, is the last thing you want."

"Yes, but that's another thing: my job," she said. "How can I go to the Cotswolds and still keep my job?"

"You can't—not your present job. I shall pay you to act as my temporary housekeeper."

"But I have to give notice—lots and lots of notice—before I can leave."

"It will have to be skipped. Suffering from a severe nervous breakdown (not that the medical profession, I'm given to understand, recognises any such thing, but it strikes a sympathetic chord in the lay mind) ought to do the trick. I'll word the letter for you."

"What are you grinning about?"

"Financial problems too unwieldy for the undersigned to surmount without assistance."

"Oh, Tim! How horrid you are!" But, to his relief, her face cleared and she laughed. "I shall have to tell the police

where I'm going, I suppose. That's another thing: do you think they'll let me?"

"I don't think they can stop you unless they charge you, and they are hardly likely to do that."

Her face changed again. In a subdued way she said,

"I can't stand the uncertainty, Tim."

"But there isn't any uncertainty. How can there be?"

"It's the attack that was made on Pembroke."

"Well, you didn't attack him, did you?"

"Who do *you* think did?"

"Leonie. She's quite capable of it, as I've already said to somebody else—Tom Parsons, I think it was. Why do you think Pembroke hasn't pressed charges? He knows she did it. And why do you think she alleges (good word, that!) she spotted you handing round the festal eats and clearing the tables afterwards? Because she wants to alibi herself. If you ask me, the same applies to her statement that she saw old Ignatius hanging about down by the new hut. If one cat won't jump, perhaps the other may. That's the way she argues. I'd take a bet on it."

"When could you have us down in Gloucestershire?"

"At the drop of a hat. Your furniture is in store, so you've nothing to do but pack a couple of suitcases and get a certificate from your doctor."

"The twins will drive you out of your mind, won't they?"

"They won't have the chance: while I'm giving them and you—but not Miranda, mind!—houserom in the Cotswolds, I shall be staying at my club."

"Oh! Oh, will you?" Remembering Parsons's insinuation that Marion was in love with him, he thought she sounded deflated.

"Yes. You'll be quite all right. The servants will do all that's necessary. There's a whacking great common where the twins can play, and there's a golf-course quite near. Do you play golf?"

“No. Tim, what are your servants going to think when I turn up with two eight-year-old children and take possession?”

“They’ll think what I tell them to think. But if you’re fretting about it, simply buy yourself a plain gold ring, put it on the third finger of the left hand, and you become my cousin, recently widowed, from New Zealand.”

“I’m not in the mood for being laughed at.”

“For heaven’s sake! Who’s laughing at you? The point is that it doesn’t matter a two-penny damn what my servants think. Any guest of mine is—well, that’s what she is. Now do stop raising these feeble-minded objections. Everything’s under control.”

The one thing which was not under control was Marion herself. Two days after he had notified his chauffeur to meet them at the station, and to see her and the twins off to Gloucestershire, he received a letter from her.

“Pembroke and Leonie have agreed to look after all three children, so your chauffeur has taken us to Mold. I am giving myself up to the police for stabbing Pembroke. Thank you for everything.”

Timothy rang up Pembroke and obtained his confirmation of the news.

“We’re keeping Marion here for the present. I’m afraid she’s bound to be arrested,” said Pembroke.

“Suppose you deny her story? You decided not to press charges, I thought.”

“Quite right, and I’m not pressing charges. I shall stick to my previous story. Actually, it’s true. I *don’t* know who stabbed me. Unfortunately, that doesn’t help Marion.”

“Mind if I come along and talk to her? I take it she isn’t yet under arrest.”

“It’s only a question of time, I’m afraid. By the way, they’ve put Scotland Yard on to the case.”

“Rather a small job for the Yard to tackle, I should have thought.”

"Well, the trouble is, you see, that I don't think they'll stop at the minor charge. They'll assume that if she tried to do for me, she *did* do for Olwen."

"Good heavens, what next? Expect me without fail tomorrow afternoon! The girl must be off her head!"

"Something funny somewhere, as you say. Right! Be seeing you!"

When he reached the bungalow next day, it was to find that Marion had locked herself in her room and that Pembroke and Leonie were in the middle of an argument. They broke it off when the charwoman showed Timothy in, but he caught one sentence from Pembroke.

"I can't," Timothy heard him say. "How can I? I've got to give evidence at the trial."

"I'll tell you another thing you've got to do," said Leonie, when she had greeted Timothy and had promised to tell Marion that he had arrived. "You've got to trace the Nanradoc deeds, and you've got to find out what's happened to Olwen's money and whether she made a will."

"I'm not going muck-racking round! I shall sell Nanradoc, and . . ."

"You can't sell Nanradoc unless you can find the deeds."

". . . and I have enough money, and so have you, for anything we and Miranda may need, so that's that."

"In any case, you can't sell Nanradoc over Miranda's head."

"Can't I? You wait and see."

"Meanwhile," said Timothy, "what about Marion? You don't believe that she stabbed you, and I'm absolutely sure she didn't."

"Leonie saw her," declared Pembroke, grinning.

"Saw her stab you? But, over the telephone you said . . ."

"No, she saw her at the doings—at the banquet. She was got up as one of the maids who waited at table."

"That's not Marion's story, you know. At least, it *wasn't*. I don't know what she's telling the police now."

"What *was* her story, then?" asked Leonie.

"That she was supposed to go to a cookery class that night, but found she couldn't afford the ingredients and so went to a News Theatre and then for a ride on the Underground, and so forth."

"Why?" demanded Pembroke.

"Because she'd arranged for a baby-sitter and wanted a free evening."

"You must admit it sounds thin."

Timothy had thought this himself, when Marion produced it as an alibi, but he did not intend to admit it. He said,

"If Marion tried to kill you, the inference is that she killed your sister, and that doesn't make sense, you know."

"Why not? It makes complete sense to me," said Leonie. So it did to Timothy. Pushed into a corner, he said,

"Let's give it a bit more thought. You see, if anybody gained by your sister's death, Pembroke, *you* did. How about that?"

"Fair enough," said Leonie. "The only snag is that nobody could be shown to have gained by Olwen's death until Olwen's body was found and identified, and the finding of the body was quite accidental. You admit that, I suppose?"

"Certainly. But for my interference in Marion's affairs the body might never have been found. Oh, Lord, oh Lord!"

"Well, then?"

"Surely, sooner or later, Olwen's death would have had to be presumed if Miranda was to benefit."

"Yes, that's a reasonable supposition, but it wouldn't have operated until after Pembroke's own death, would it?" said Leonie.

"You mean that, before Miranda could inherit Nanradoc, both you and your sister must be presumed to be dead,"



said Timothy to Pembroke. "Yes, I see that, all right. But that brings me to another point, and it is very much in Marion's favour, it seems to me."

"Oh? And what's that?"

"While Miranda is alive there is no point at all in getting rid of you. While Miranda is alive, Marion doesn't stand a chance of inheriting Nanradoc, so why should she run the awful risk of trying to kill you? I can't believe that the police will arrest her, and that's that, and I'm prepared to do everything in my power to get the charge dropped, if they bring one."

"Well, of course, I don't want to see the poor girl in trouble," said Pembroke. "I thought I'd made that clear."

"I've had to tell the police I saw her at the banquet," said Leonie, "and, of course, as the police pointed out to Pembroke, if Marion had had one go at him, there was nothing to stop her from having another try, so we were asking for trouble having her in the house."

"But surely the police will need a lot more to go on than just your assertion that you'd seen her at the banquet," said Timothy to Leonie.

"Disguised as one of the waitresses, don't forget."

"I don't believe it, you know," said Timothy. "I don't believe she was at the banquet in any capacity whatsoever."

"I'm not a liar," said Leonie, dangerously. Timothy gave up the argument while the charwoman brought in the tea.

"Is Marion coming down?" he asked. Marion answered this question herself by appearing in the doorway.

"Oh, hullo, Tim," she said. Timothy looked at her sternly.

"You're being very silly," he said. "What on earth made you throw yourself on to the dicks?"

"I can't discuss that now. The children will be here in a minute."

"Yes, and what's going to happen to them if you get yourself arrested?"

"Leonie says she'll look after them. And now, please be quiet, because here they come."

The children, except for Miranda, who showed a disposition to climb on to Pembroke's knee, seemed subdued.

"Well," said Leonie, with the forced brightness of the woman who does not like children, "and what did you all find to play at?"

"Being models," said Bryn.

"Being models? Oh, dear! You haven't been playing in the studio, have you?"

"It rained. We had to play somewhere."

"Well, you could have come inside and read your books," said Marion, in the harassed tones of a parent whose offspring are not showing to advantage in someone else's house. "I'm sorry," she added to Leonie, "but I don't suppose they did any harm."

"I should rather they did not go into the studio," said Leonie. "I've always got something half-finished in there, and if they took the damp cloths off . . ."

"Oh, I'm sure they wouldn't touch anything! You didn't touch anything, did you?" asked Marion, rather desperately.

"Well," said Bryn, "not really."

"I had better go and see," said Leonie, getting up. "Perhaps you'd pour out tea."

Tea was not a comfortable meal. No damage had been done in the studio, but the children had played with the clay and made a considerable mess with it, and it was discovered that Miranda, who, apparently, had been undressed and made to stand as the "model," had accumulated a good deal of clay on her person.

"We thought it was better than on her clothes," explained Bron, in practical tones.

"It will clog the bath," said Leonie. The children made up for being disapproved of by stodging, with silent concentration, into thick bread and butter, fishpaste, jam,

and cake, followed by fruit and cream, for the artists, although allergic to the young, were not reluctant to minister to their animal requirements.

It was not until after dinner (extremely well-cooked by Pembroke) that Timothy had a chance to speak seriously to Marion.

"Leonie and I can go along to the local, if you like," said Pembroke. "I daresay you two have things to talk about."

"Nothing that can't be said in front of witnesses, and I'd rather you stayed," said Timothy. "Firstly, Marion, what's all this nonsense? Don't you realise, you little nitwit, that if you convince the dicks you stabbed Pembroke they'll decide you killed Olwen?"

"They couldn't do that! I didn't even know that Olwen existed," she burst out in a frightened tone.

"That's a lie, for a start," said Leonie angrily. Pembroke tried to restrain her by putting a hand on her arm, but she continued, "I believe you said you first met Pembroke when you were small. *Where* did you meet him? Tell Tim that!"

"I don't remember. Don't badger me!"

"Then I'll remember for you. The only place you could have met him when you were a child was at Nanradoc House, and Olwen was living there, too. Pembroke, I assure you, didn't leave Nanradoc until after he married me and had quarrelled with his sister. You've got a guilty conscience over something, and that's why you're trying to give yourself up to the police."

"Well," said Timothy, "I'm not going to let you, and that's flat!"

# CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

## The Private Eye

Marion was not to be reasoned with. She refused point blank to see Timothy again, after he had left Mold, and sent a message to him by the solicitor he had found for her to tell him that it did not matter what happened to her, she was sick of life, anyway, and might as well be in prison as anywhere else.

“Well, I’m not proposing to leave it at that,” said Timothy to his own solicitor, with whom he had consulted. “I’m going to put a private eye to work. Can you recommend anybody?”

“No, I cannot,” replied the lawyer distastefully. “We have no dealings with such persons. I can, however, put you in touch with a firm of solicitors who specialise in cases of divorce. They may be able to give you the name of somebody of the sort you have in mind. As for Miss Marion Jones, she is probably suffering from the shock of the discovery of her cousin’s body. Shock can have strange effects. When she has recovered a little, you may find her more co-operative. My advice would be to wait until this happier state of mind comes about, before you entrust her affairs to a private detective.”

“I’d like the name and address of this firm you mention, anyway,” said Timothy, “and, before I go to them, I will think over what you have said.”

No amount of thinking over the lawyer's advice, however, convinced him that matters could be left as they were, so, two days later, having come to a settled conclusion, he rang up and arranged for an interview with the firm whose name he had been given, and on the following afternoon he saw the senior partner and received the name and address of a retired Inspector of Police who was now a freelance and did private work for the firm.

He found the retired Inspector Grant a man of few words and long silences. One of these ensued after Timothy had outlined the case to him. At last he said,

"So if we could clear the lassie of this charge of stabbing her cousin in the back after the ending of the banquet, you think the further charge which you believe to be pending would have to be dropped? I'm not saying you might not be right about that. Let me think, now."

He sat and cogitated for perhaps five minutes and, at the end of that time, he shook his head.

"It will be awful difficult," he said lugubriously. "Aye, awful difficult it will be. You see, there's the lassie's own confession."

"I know," said Timothy, "but if I believed a word of it I wouldn't be here taking up your time, Mr. Grant. You'd almost think she means it when she says she wants to get herself arrested and thrown into the jug, and she certainly will be, the way she's going on."

The grey-haired, enigmatical Scotsman looked at him. There was another long silence. Timothy took out his cigarette case and lighter and, still without speaking, Grant accepted a cigarette and a light. At last he said,

"Man, I think I understand what she's about."

"How do you mean?"

"That maybe the lassie would feel *safer* in prison than out of it. Now we have to find out the reason for this, if it is true. And, as a starting-point, I am going to assume that it *is* true. If so, this is indicative of the fact that, whether she has

enemies or not, she *thinks* she has. Moreover, she thinks they will stick at nothing. In other words, she believes that her life may be in danger while she is loose in the world. Not for anything less than a fear for her very life would a respectable young lass be induced to confess to a very dirty, backhanded crime. What say you?"

"Well, yes, it's a starting-point, certainly, Mr. Grant. You are thinking of this Father Ignatius and the woman who calls herself Olwen Jones, I suppose."

"Maybe, but I do not exclude Mr. Pembroke Pritchard Jones and his wife. My experience has been that if you are looking at dirty work, Mr. Herring, look first, and look hardest, at the members of the family concerned."

"I can't see how Marion can be a danger to Pembroke and Leonie," said Timothy.

"Can you not? Well, well, you know them and I do not, but there are points of interest about what you tell me. I shall think them over, and then I shall communicate with you." He sank again into a silence which Timothy did not like to break. He was about to light another cigarette when Grant came to the surface and said, "Well, I'll wish you a very good afternoon, Mr. Herring. You'll be hearing from me. Aye, you'll be hearing very soon, I trust."

This happened even sooner than Timothy had anticipated. Within a week he received Grant's first report. It was not only interesting but important. Grant, it appeared, having been a member of the regular Force for many years, had numerous contacts, some of them policemen, some of them "grasses," some of them eminent, some of them obscure. In this particular instance he had his facts straight from the horse's mouth; in fact, they came from the detective-inspector in charge of the case.

"The police are at present unlikely to proceed on Miss Marion Jones's confession," Grant wrote. "Reasons as listed

below:"

- (1) She was teaching at her school on the required date. The school does not close until 4.30 p.m. Attested.
- (2) She was at her post again at 8.45 a.m. on the following morning. Attested.
- (3) From these facts, checked with headmistress and colleagues, it is considered unlikely that she should have been able to get to Nanradoc and back between the times stated, but enquiries are being instituted at railway stations.
- (4) No person answering to her description can be accounted for among those employed to cook and serve the dinner after which Mr. Pembroke Jones was wounded by stabbing.

"I should wish, sir," Grant's letter continued, "to add the following observations:"

- (1) From the gates of her school, Miss Marion Jones could have caught a bus for the 5.50 p.m. fast train to Chester, but, if so, she did not put in an appearance at Nanradoc even at 9.30 p.m. when the dinner was over. She could not have reached Nanradoc in the time allowed.
- (2) She could have travelled back at night and remained at the London terminus until she returned to school on the following morning, but if (1) does not apply, then neither does (2).
- (3) There is nothing more to report on this at present, but I shall keep myself informed.
- (4) This is now a dead end, so far as the police are concerned, and they are unlikely to proceed with it further. I should add that they are now combing out the private hire people, but, in view of the prohibitive cost

of such a return journey by hired car, particularly as the return itself would have had to be made by night, they are not hopeful of success in proving that Miss Marion Jones used this form of transport, and are strongly inclined to treat her confession as bogus.

I will keep you further informed, sir, of what transpires, and have the honour to remain,

Your obedient servant,  
J. C. Grant.

Timothy was relieved when he had read this letter, and amused himself that evening by inventing various ways in which Marion, if expense had been no object, might have got to Nanradoc and back between the times stated. She could have chartered a private aeroplane and flown. There was plenty of room to land on the field behind Nanradoc House. She might be the fortunate possessor of a magic carpet. She might have thumbed a lift in a car. He worked out the mileage, but decided that the time factor was decisive. Marion could not possibly have left school after four-thirty and got to Nanradoc in time to stab Pembroke at about ten.

Amused by his own conceits of how Marion could have reached Nanradoc in time to attack Jones that night, he continued to indulge his fancies until one came up which caused him some disquiet, so much, in fact, that he decided to forget it, to thrust it out of his mind. In modern secondary schools there were such amenities as what the teachers called free periods, intended to be used as marking times. Marion herself had mentioned them.

Suppose she had had, say, the second period free? That might mean that she could have left the school at about half-past two. There was yet another possibility. Suppose



she had established an alibi by marking the register, and then had told the class that she had to see the headmistress and, on the strength of this excuse, had left them to their own devices and simply walked off the premises and caught a train? If she had left, say, at around two o'clock, she could have got to Nanradoc by half-past nine by hiring a car for the last part of the journey, the journey up the Pass. She would have had enough money. She had lived rent-free all the time she had been at the Phisbe headquarters, and he himself had paid the bills at the Ealing Common boarding-house.

Grant's second report was the reverse of reassuring, and Timothy, who had a theory that thoughts and ideas can be air-borne like thistledown or dandelion seeds, wondered afterwards whether his own idle speculations could have lodged themselves in Grant's methodical mind. The second report ran:

On thinking matters over, it occurred to me that the difficulty about the time factor could be readily overcome if it could be shown that Miss Marion Jones left her school at a considerably earlier hour than that of four-thirty, when the school normally closes. I do not intend to suggest this to my friend Detective-Inspector Hearnnes without your express sanction, but, as it has occurred to me, there is every chance that it will also occur to him.

I should wish to have your explicit instructions on this point, as I formed the opinion at our interview that you were retaining me to safeguard the interests of the lady in question and not vice-versa.

In a great fright Timothy telephoned to say that, in his opinion, it could not serve anybody's interest to find ways

by which Miss Marion Jones *could* have reached Nanradoc that evening, that this would only serve to confuse the issue and that the ends of justice would best be served by leaving well alone. He thanked Grant for pointing out an obvious possibility, and refrained from saying that it had already occurred to himself. He offered a retaining fee until such time as Scotland Yard crossed Marion and her confession off their list, and requested Grant to suspend all further enquiries until he heard from him again.

Nevertheless, he was very seriously perturbed. He blamed himself for having been foolish enough to introduce a private detective into a matter which was going along quite nicely on its own, but he congratulated himself that, if he had taken an ill-considered step, at least he had taken it in company with an honest man. He wondered what would have been the outcome had Grant pursued his enquiries and then had blackmailed either Marion or himself (both of them, perhaps) on the strength of the results.

All his former doubts about Marion came flooding back, added to others which had come to him in the form of remarks made by other people, notably by Leonie Bing. He tried to dismiss these by reminding himself that Leonie mixed a certain amount of malice with her shrewdness, but, even so, there had been much in her incisive observations. He recalled, in particular, two of these. They had imprinted themselves on his mind more definitely than he had realised. The first was on the occasion of his preliminary meeting with the artists.

*"She's got those two brats of her own to think about."*

*"Her brother's children, do you mean?"*

*"Bless your kind heart!"*

Then there had followed a remark about trousers, but that had been brought in to disguise the spitefulness (as he had thought it at the time) of the suggestion that Bryn and Bron were Marion's own children, and illegitimate at that.

Then, much later in his acquaintance with her, Leonie, he began to fear, had hit another nail on the head.

*"I didn't even know that Olwen existed."*

*"That's a lie, for a start."*

What was more, Leonie had gone on to prove that it was a lie, Timothy uncomfortably remembered. Add the business of the poker coupled with her own admission that she had let the monk into the Phisbe house, and there, he thought ruefully, it began to look as though there was a case fitted. A week later he received a third letter from Grant.

Bearing in mind your instructions not to proceed with the matter under review, I now have to inform you that Scotland Yard have also dropped their own enquiries into the bona fides of Miss Marion Jones's confession that she stabbed Mr. Pembroke Jones in the back. As I thought he might, Detective-Inspector Hearnnes examined the possibility of Miss Marion Jones's leaving school before it closed for the day, but the head teacher declared that this was impossible, as her teachers would not dream of leaving the building without permission while school was in session. Needless to say, this assertion did not convince the Detective-Inspector, but as the police themselves are assured that the confession was one of the many which they receive as soon as a spectacular case is reported in the newspapers, they have decided to disregard it, particularly as Mr. Jones, from the beginning, has refused to press charges. In fact, I am told that, but for the discovery of Miss Olwen Jones's body in the well at Nanradoc Castle, the police would never have pursued the minor matter of the stabbing.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### The Woodpecker and the Crow

Timothy found Grant's news inexpressibly cheering. Marion, it seemed, was cleared. If the police had written off her confession that she had stabbed Pembroke, they were not likely, he thought, to be pursuing her for the murder of Olwen Jones. This led him to reconsider the evidence against the trousered woman and the unsavoury black-robed Ignatius.

One thing was very clear. At Olwen's death they had gained a permanent home and a tax-free income of sixty pounds a month. He put this to Grant and suggested that the information might be handed on to the police. Grant scratched his chin.

"The police know all about that couple, sir. The Woodpecker and the Crow are the detective-inspector's names for them. I knew a bit about them myself when I was in the Force. We had them on a number of charges at different times."

"Really? Rather bold of them, then, to come forward at once, like that, wasn't it?"

"Probably thought it was better than hiding away until the police winkled them out, I fancy, sir. You and Miss Marion Jones had both seen them and could describe them, although I'm bound to admit that the trouser-suit and the religious outfit are new."

"Are they married?"

"No, sir, brother and sister. They go under a number of aliases, but we always booked them under the name of Birds—Claribel and Hubert Birds."

"What's their speciality?"

"What isn't? We've had them for shop-lifting, false pretences, back-street abortions, credit by fraud, money by menaces—you name it, they've tried it."

"Just petty criminals, in fact."

"Just petty criminals. That's why I can't see them as murderers. Their kind don't step out of their class. They never mix themselves up in anything big. The major crimes frighten them. Any experienced police officer will tell you that."

"There are exceptions to every rule, though. Besides, you mentioned back-street abortions. Aren't those murders? What I want you to do now is to see whether you can trace any of the servants who were at Nanradoc when the Birds went there first."

"The simplest thing would be to advertise for the servants, sir. Then you could get their stories at first hand."

"That's an idea," said Timothy.

"Then, if you have no further instructions, Mr. Herring . . ."

Timothy was immensely surprised at the finality of Grant's tone.

"You want to pack up the job?" he asked.

"I think our interests may not, in the future, be entirely mutual, sir." Grant accepted Timothy's cheque with brief thanks and a very direct and sympathetic look, and, with Grant's departure, Timothy's newly-acquired feeling of relief vanished. Grant's parting remarks could mean only one thing. He believed that the police had dismissed Marion's confession of the stabbing because they intended to bring the much graver charge against her of having murdered Olwen.

Timothy gave his head an abrupt and vigorous shake to clear it, then he sat down, lit a cigarette, and planned the wording of his advertisement. When he had written it out, he took another sheet of paper and wrote out his reasons for refusing to suspect Marion.

To begin with, there was the nature of the crime itself. It had been a beastly crime; a brutal crime; moreover, it had been a man's, not a woman's, crime. It was impossible to conceive of a young woman bashing and battering to death another young woman—a lame young woman, at that—in the fashion suggested by the medical evidence. Of course, there had been the business of the poker. But no! The brutality which had killed Olwen Jones was a man's brutality, was the brutality of savage male violence and vindictiveness, he assured himself.

Then there was the business of filling in the well. He had touched on that before. He could not envisage the thin, ill-nourished Marion undertaking the mammoth spadework which that operation would have entailed. Besides, what had she gained by the death? According to the evidence of the doctors, the body had been in the well for a couple of years. During that time Marion had been very hard put to it to make ends meet. Until she wrote to Phisbe she had asked nobody for help, it seemed. She had been prepared to look after the baby Miranda because the money Pembroke paid her was a little more, no doubt, than Miranda actually cost to keep, although Marion, he remembered, had not admitted this. Of course, if she *had* attacked Pembroke . . .

Timothy began to feel worried. Carefully he underlined the word *Pembroke*; then he enclosed it in a neat rectangle; then he shaded the rectangle in. Pembroke? Well, why not? Here was somebody who *must* count, if the police wanted to establish motive. Timothy's imagination took charge. The accident to Olwen. Pembroke blaming himself for it. The amputation. The continued remorse felt by Pembroke. The artistic temperament. (Timothy was prepared to believe that

there was such a thing, and that it was not manifested only by prima donnas and leading actresses). Better to put an ugly thing right out of the way, rather than allow it to remain a constant, an unendurable reproach until one's life's end. The brutal attack. The extra, unnecessary blows. The moments of sheer destructive madness. Oh, yes, it could have been Pembroke all right. He was powerful enough, and, being an artist, probably got carried away.

Not that Scotland Yard were likely to embrace Timothy's theatrical theory. Well, there was no need for them to do so. If they wanted to find a motive (not that it was necessary to show motive when a case of murder came to be tried) they had only to note that, with Olwen out of the way, Pembroke automatically became the sole owner of Nanradoc.

But was the sole ownership of Nanradoc such a prize to an already wealthy and fashionable painter married to a well-known and probably well-off sculptor? Most of the estate was worthless, and thousands would need to be spent on the house to render it reasonably comfortable. Besides, there was the difficulty which Timothy had foreseen previously. Pembroke would have to ask leave to presume that his sister was dead before he could call himself the sole owner of Nanradoc, and, if he had murdered her, this would appear an extremely dangerous request to make. Timothy tore up his notes and went for a long walk over the hills.

His advertisement, inserted in four daily, three evening, three Sunday, and two Welsh local papers, brought responses in the middle of the following week. The first person who turned up claimed to have been the Nanradoc cook. Timothy, whose experiences in helping to administer Phisbe's charitable affairs had early developed in him a sixth sense which smelt out cheats and charlatans, received her kindly, asked her to describe the Nanradoc kitchen and what could be seen from its windows, and, still urbane, dismissed her at the end of ten minutes.

The next fish which came to this net introduced herself by means of a letter.

“Being in weak health and living on Government Pension and small savings,” it said, “cannot afford the fare unless really something to my advantage, meaning a bit of money, to show for it. If genuine, send my fare, please, which can be deducted from expectations, or you could come here.”

The address on the letter was Swansea. Timothy sent a postcard, asking the writer to expect him. She turned out to be a small, circular, round-headed Welshwoman with grey hair and a suspicious manner.

“I have to inform you I have a brother in the kitchen,” she said, in the unmistakable accents of South Wales, “so, if you were thinking of trying any funny business, I would not, indeed, if I were you.”

To this Timothy, who enjoyed warfare, countered with:

“I might give you the same warning, Mrs. Lloyd. I have already had one claimant who attempted to impose on me. We have at last come across a will made by a former employer of yours (if you can satisfy me that you were in fact in her employment) in which she allocates a sum of fifty pounds each to all servants still in her employment at the time of her death. Now,” said Timothy, becoming impressive, “you saw in my advertisement that the place of employment was Nanradoc House in North Wales. What was the name of your employer?”

“My goodness! Fifty pounds! Well, that’s nice, now, isn’t it? My employer at Nanradoc—five years I was there—lonely but beautiful, wouldn’t you say?—Snowdon and the lakes and the river and all that, you know—yes, indeed, and my employers was Mr. Pembroke Jones and his sister, Miss Olwen Jones. Good they were to me, you know, but a bit standoffish like.”



"Can you describe them?" He was sure that Mrs. Lloyd was genuine, but it did not hurt to take precautions.

"Describe them? Not very good at that sort of thing I am not. Mr. Pembroke was tall—a big man like an ox, red in the face and with a big, firm voice—a nice bass, not a tenor, I would have thought—and Miss Olwen, difficult to think they had the same mam and dad, so frail she was and rather on the small side, but with a temper! Take the skin off your face she would, with her rages."

"I suppose you know she was found dead about a month ago?"

"I read about it in the paper. And not buried too soon. Rotting, they think, poor soul, before she was put down the well. There's dreadful for you, isn't it?"

"Can you remember exactly when you left her service?"

"Oh, because of the fifty pounds, then?"

"I want to know more. You see, as we cannot—that is to say, as the doctors cannot—establish exactly when Miss Jones died, we have decided to honour the terms of the bequest and to give the legatees their money which Miss Jones obviously intended them to have. The only thing is that, as one of the executors, I have to be very, very certain that I'm getting hold of the right people. Now, can you tell me, first, who were your fellow-servants, secondly, how you came to leave your employment and, thirdly, anything else which will contribute to my belief that you are indeed entitled to your fifty pounds?"

"What sort of things would you want to know, then?"

"I can't give you a lead. Won't you cast your mind back and let me have your impressions? Little personal things might help. You mentioned that Miss Jones had a hot temper, for instance."

"You spoke of fellow-servants, I believe. Well, there were only the three of us in the house itself, and, outside, a couple of gardeners. David and Gelert Lewis they would

have been. Brothers. And inside, with me, Bertha Lewis (sister) and Betty Powell, my kitchen-maid."

"Rather a small staff for that sort of house, wasn't it?"

"Not so bad until Miss Olwen had her accident. Very sad it was, and Mr. Pembroke blaming himself for it. But after they left, he and his wife—English; I never took to her—then the work seemed rather heavy, although better when the healers came."

"The healers?"

"Oh, yes, indeed. I'm chapel myself, but Miss Olwen took the fancy to go to Chester in her car and look at an exhibition of Mr. Pembroke's pictures—very clever he is at the painting, you know—and she came back with the healers."

"I thought she had to use an invalid carriage after the damage to her leg. Was there room . . . ?"

"Oh, it wasn't a real invalid carriage. It was a car all right, with some adjustments, I believe. She had a false foot, you know—very expensive, from the Continent, I believe, not National Health, anyway—so that she could drive the car. Brought the two of them back, she did, and them offering to help in the house and garden—do anything for her, they would."

"How long did this state of things last?"

"I don't remember how long—six months, perhaps—I couldn't really say."

"And what put an end to it?"

"The coming of the disciples."

"Oh, the followers of Father Ignatius?"

"Yes. They came, and we went."

"You gave in your notice?"

"No, not exactly. We were put on board wages. We complained of the work and the crowding, and we didn't like the way they built up the little chapel in the castle and held services there. Very heathen and strange they were. Not at all nice, indeed."

“This is a very strange tale you’re telling me, Mrs. Lloyd,” said Timothy, affecting stern disbelief.

“Take it or leave it, it’s the truth, then, gospel,” she retorted, with Welsh fierceness.

“What was that about being put on board wages?”

“We complained, I told you, and Miss Olwen, well, she was put out, too. “I never intended this,” she said. “I shall have the police come and turn these people away. They can’t stay here. I shall speak to Father Ignatius, and, if he won’t get rid of them, I shall take steps.” Then she gave each of us our wages for a month and extra, you know, for food, and paid our fares home, and said she would tell us when to come back.”

“And what did you think of this very extraordinary arrangement?”

“What would you think of a month’s special wages and a month’s holiday and your fare paid home?”

“I’d think there was something very peculiar indeed about it. Really, Mrs. Lloyd, didn’t it strike you at the time as a very odd business?”

“As to that,” said Mrs. Lloyd, “we put our heads together in the kitchen and began to discuss, you know, and Gelert Lewis, always the clever one of that family, was sure Miss Olwen had no intention of getting the disciples out. He spoke of improper doings in the little chapel they built up, and he asked us hadn’t we noticed Miss Olwen getting a little queer in her ways, and he said—I give you his words—he said, ‘She does not want to get rid of the disciples; she wants to get rid of *us*. Plenty in the house to do the work and look after the garden,’ he said, ‘and our curiosity not to be satisfied. That’s what I think,’ he said. ‘Board wages and a month’s holiday be damned,’ he said. ‘I, for one, shall be giving in my notice as soon as the month is up. Come back into this wicked place I will not. There is hell fire waiting for such as these,’ he said. A very powerful speaker was Gelert

Lewis, and preached lovely—a lay preacher he was—in chapel on Sundays.”

“Did you send in your notice?”

“Oh, no. I took a little job in a small draper’s to tide me over. Only a year and eight months to go before getting my government pension. I made up my mind, though, that, if Miss Olwen wrote, I wouldn’t go back to her.”

“Why not?”

“I thought of what Gelert Lewis had said. Impressed I was. I wondered whether Miss Olwen’s accident had affected her brain.”

“Well, Mrs. Lloyd, it seems to me that, technically, you have never left Miss Jones’s service. Therefore you are entitled to your fifty pounds, and here they are.”

He left his advertisement in the various papers for another week, but received no answers. He came to the conclusion that the Lewis brothers must have given in their notices when their month on board wages was up, and had persuaded their sister to do the same. That left nobody free to answer his advertisement but the kitchen-maid. Knowing something of the North Welsh temperament, he wondered whether she was too shy or too distrustful of his intentions to come forward. In any case, he had what he wanted, and had noted Mrs. Lloyd’s address and obtained a receipt for his fifty pounds, which he considered money well spent.

The case, he thought, was now sufficiently clear. The precious pair had contrived to get rid of the servants and then, probably, Olwen had intimated either that it was her intention to inform the police about the goings-on in the chapel, or else to complain that the disciples were squatters on her property and must be removed. On this they had taken themselves off, leaving Olwen at the mercy of the Woodpecker and the Crow. The regular arrival of Pembroke’s money for the servants’ wages had signed Olwen’s death warrant. It seemed a most probable solution to a sordid and horrible mystery. Timothy wrote to Grant, setting his

conclusions before him and asking for an introduction to the detective-inspector in charge of the case.

The only part of the mystery which remained unsolved had been touched on by Mrs. Lloyd. If the Woodpecker and the Crow were Olwen's murderers, why (in the interests of their own safety) had they allowed the body to attain a state of putrefaction before they buried it? Could it be that they had *found* the body, and were *not* the murderers?

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

**“. . . the police with their enquiries.”**

*“In connection with the discovery of a body identified as that of Miss Olwen Myfanwy Jones, late of Nanradoc House, Caernarvonshire, a woman is helping the police with their enquiries.”*

Timothy had sent off his letter to Grant to catch the last post of the day, and on the following morning he saw the announcement in the paper. More than one interpretation could be put upon it, but, judging from past experience, he was pretty sure it meant that an arrest was imminent. He telephoned Grant.

“Have you had my letter?”

“I have, Mr. Herring.”

“What’s this about some woman helping the police with their enquiries?”

“I will find out, Mr. Herring, and ring you back.”

There were, of course, several possibilities, thought Timothy, comforting himself. It need not be Marion. It could be Mrs. Lloyd, a little puzzled and troubled by her small legacy and his visit. She might have turned the conversation over in her mind—he was sure she did not lack intelligence—and have come to the conclusion that some of his questions had been both strange and unnecessary if he were merely establishing her identity and her claim never to have been dismissed from service at Nanradoc House. She might also have realised that some of her own answers had

been the reverse of discreet. She might never have heard of Satanism, but she had certainly referred, although not in detail, (she probably did not know details or else was too modest and “chapel-going” to reveal them), of the disagreeable and possibly orgiastic services in the castle chapel.

If she had alarmed herself, it was quite on the cards that she had gone to the police and retailed the whole conversation. If she were not the woman in question, there were others. Perhaps the little kitchen-maid or the Lewis sister had been suspicious of his advertisement and had decided that it would be wise to tell the police of their experiences at Nanradoc. People of their class, he had gathered, dreaded the thought of being mixed up with the police, but perhaps the woman, whoever she was, had thought it safest to seek them out before the boot was on the other foot and they had pulled her in for questioning.

So much for the obviously innocent. Apart from Marion, whose idiotic confession that she had stabbed Pembroke puzzled him the more every time he thought about it, there remained Leonie Bing and the trousered Birds woman. Leonie might conceivably have gone to the police of her own volition, and certainly the trousered woman and her brother (if that, indeed, was the relationship) had come out of hiding soon enough when they heard that Olwen Jones’s body had been found. There, again, they might have thought it better to come forward rather than to wait until the police pounced on them.

Timothy had to wait until the following day before he received a telephone communication from Grant.

“I would like to speak to Mr. Herring, please.”

“Speaking. That you, Grant?”

“It is. Are you alone, sir?”

“Yes, nobody within earshot of me. What’s the news?”

“The lady at Caernarvon is Miss Marion Jones.”

“Oh, Lord! No! Why on earth has she done that?”

"It was not her wish that she should be called upon to help, sir."

"You don't mean they've actually pulled her in! On what grounds?"

"Motive. Means and opportunity as yet undecided."

"Good Lord! Does it mean the magistrates?"

"It looks verra like it, I'm fearing."

"What do you think I can do?"

"Brief her the best lawyer you can get, sir. She'll need him badly, I'm thinking. I won't say more over the telephone. I'll be sending you a communication."

"Don't bother. Just send me a bill." He rang off and sat down to think. There was no help to be had from Grant. The ex-inspector was an honest man. He believed that the police had hit the right nail on the head and, what with his police training and (Timothy pulled a wry face) his Scottish principles, it was useless to expect him to look for another culprit. He began to whistle a doleful air, and realised that it was the tune put to the old ballad of "The Four Maries."

*Yestreen the Queen had four Maries,  
Tonight she'll hae but three—*

One good thing, they did not hang people nowadays. They always had hated hanging women, he had heard. With luck, the guilty person—he refused to conceive that it could possibly be Marion—might get away after nine years. If it could be brought in as manslaughter it would be less, especially if severe provocation could be shown, and Olwen, according to what he had gathered, was not the easiest of persons to have dealings with.

What prompted Timothy to his subsequent courses of action he would have found it difficult, if not impossible, to explain. Grant, from his point of view, must be written off. That sea-green incorruptible was a broken reed, so far as



Marion was concerned. He reviewed the sequence of events. He had read (mostly in detective stories, it was true) that the insoluble crime is that which seems purposeless and matter-of-fact, and which the criminal has declined to embroider. He thought of the classic cases in which the police had been successful because of mistakes or over-elaboration by the criminal—George Joseph Smith, who (foolishly) had drowned his third wife; Norman Thorne, who had tried to be too clever; Crippen, who had fled to America with the girl for whose sake—partly, at any rate—he had murdered his unkind spouse; the insane letters written by Neill Cream; the extraordinary conduct of Alfred Rouse after he had burned the body in his car.

Timothy went over the sequence of events which looked likely (he had to face it) to lead to Marion's arrest. She had been much too eager to press her claim to the full ownership of the Nanradoc house, castle, and estate. Again and again he had blamed himself for that, and no doubt Pembroke and Leonie had come forward with evidence of it. Then there were Marion's apparent willingness to take on three children and support two of them out of a salary which she must have known would be insufficient; the strange story of Olwen Jones's shattered leg, leading to Pembroke's and Leonie's leaving Nanradoc; Olwen's teaming-up with the Birds, those extraordinary nightjars—all these facts, if facts they were, must have some sort of significance, but he could not see how to use any of them to Marion's advantage if she was in trouble in the sense that he feared.

It was when his thoughts reached this point, and he felt he had come to an impasse, that something buried in his consciousness came slowly but with increasing sureness to the surface, and, in the darkness, an idea began to take shape. There was one other strange chapter in the story which had had its climax in Olwen Jones's death. Why, Timothy wondered, if she was really so bitter about her accident that Pembroke and Leonie had decided to leave

Nanradoc for good, had Olwen gone to Chester to look at the exhibition of her brother's pictures? Did it mean that she had forgiven him? She did not seem to have followed up the expedition by getting in touch with him personally.

Then he thought again. The culmination of that visit to Chester had been the introduction to Nanradoc of the Birds, that extraordinary pair of (it seemed) petty criminals, followed by the descent of their "disciples" and the subsequent departure of the servants. Later, the disciples had left, and it was after they had gone that Olwen had been murdered, and her body, much later, buried in the well.

Time had gone by between that and his own first visit to Nanradoc—two years, probably. Meanwhile the Birds had been living not only rent free, but on an income of sixty pounds a month provided by Pembroke Jones. It was a small income, he realised, but it was steady and it was unearned and tax-free, and the Birds were no longer young, and at Nanradoc their needs were probably few. The problem (and he could see no way to solve it unless the Birds themselves would tell him the answer, and, even if they did, he would not know whether to believe them) was to find out how Olwen had come to be associated with them. Then he remembered that Mrs. Lloyd, ex-cook to the household, had referred to them as "the healers." That might explain why Olwen had gone to them, gone, with her physical disability and her warped and troubled mind, because they claimed to possess the gift of spiritual healing.

Timothy remembered Grant's reference to back-street abortions. Spiritual healing might have proved more profitable; it was certainly far less dangerous unless it went beyond certain bounds and claims. The longer he thought about it, the more convinced he became that there were two things he ought to do if Marion was not to be implicated in a murder of which he was convinced she knew nothing, and which she certainly had not committed. He decided that

he would go to the art gallery in Chester as a starting point—it could be nothing more than that, he surmised—and from there attempt to trace the connection between Olwen and her strange acquaintances.

Here, he thought, he might be reasonably successful, since the newspaper stories of the discovery of the body, followed by the news that the police were being “helped in their enquiries” would have refreshed people’s memories and set tongues wagging. If his enquiries led anywhere, they must, at some point, lead to the Birds. He had no belief whatever in Grant’s theory that petty criminals never mixed themselves up in major crime. The Birds had had much to gain and, while they remained unsuspected of having caused it, nothing to lose by Olwen’s death.

He slept upon these cogitations and opinions, then, on the following morning, he rang up Parsons and asked whether he could stay for a couple of nights, as he had business to do in Chester. He was told to come as soon as ever he liked, and to stay as long as he could.

“Chester?” said Parsons, when they met. “Visiting that art gallery which Pembroke Jones uses as his shop window? Is that what you’re thinking of doing?”

“Saul among the prophets! Yes, as a matter of fact, it is.”

“I’m afraid you’ll be unlucky,” said Diana Parsons. “Pembroke Jones and Leonie Bing are not exhibiting again until the spring. I always get the leaflet the gallery sends out. It came last week. That gallery always seems to be booked up—there must be a lot of interested people living in Chester—and the present exhibitors—I’d better find the leaflet—yes, here we are. Oh, dear! Does it mean you’ve had your journey for nothing? Never mind! Your loss is our gain.”

“No, I didn’t come hoping to look at Jones’s pictures,” said Timothy. “In fact, I’m very pleased he isn’t exhibiting at present, because it means I’m not likely to run into him or Leonie Bing. The people I want to see—not that I imagine they’ll be able to tell me what I want to know—this is very much a shot in the dark—are the people who run the gallery. I’ve got the address. You supplied it, if you remember, so that I could write and get Jones’s address from them. I want to ask them what they remember, if anything, about a visit Olwen Jones paid to the gallery to look at her brother’s paintings.”

“But that must have been years ago! I mean, she’s been dead for—how many years?” said Diana.

“Oh, I know. I don’t really expect to get anything useful from them. The fact is that I’m almost at my wits’ end. You’ve read in the papers that some woman is helping the police at Caernarvon with their enquiries, I suppose? Well, it seems to be Marion, and you know what that usually means.”

“You mean that, after all, they believed her when she confessed she stabbed Pembroke?”

“I mean they must have a bee in their bonnets and believe she murdered Olwen.”

“Well, the two things would seem to hang together, wouldn’t they?” suggested Diana.

“Yes, I think they would, but I’m sure it wasn’t Marion. I believe it was one of those beauties who were living at Nanradoc after Olwen’s death.”

“Much more likely. I wonder the police haven’t cottoned on to that.”

“According to a private eye I briefed to watch Marion’s interests—only he declined to do any such thing and handed in his cards—the police have a long list of petty crimes committed by that pair. Their name is Birds, by the way, and they are affectionately known to the authorities as the Woodpecker and the Crow.”

"A long list of convictions? Then, surely . . ." said Parsons. Timothy groaned.

"I know," he said. "I shouldn't have thought they needed to look any further for Olwen Jones's murderers. But they've got some dyed-in-the-wool, unshakeable official theory that petty criminals don't go in for major crime, and that murder is the last thing they commit. I argued with Grant, but he's an ex-inspector of police and takes the general view."

"But the motive!" said Diana. "It sticks out a mile!"

"I know. Well, anyway, there it is. Of course, Marion is the prize chump to beat all prize chumps. She proved that, I think, when she took on kids she had to starve herself to keep. If only she hadn't confessed to stabbing Pembroke she'd never have occurred to the police at all, I'm perfectly certain."

"But I thought they disregarded the confession."

"Only because they were after bigger things. I still can't think why Marion was idiot enough to go to them and tell them she'd done it. They could so easily work out that if she was in school that afternoon she couldn't have got to Nanradoc in time for the end of that feast."

"*If* she was in school that afternoon," said Parsons.

"That would need to be proved, wouldn't it?"

"I can tell you why she confessed," said Diana, unexpectedly. Timothy stared at her.

"You can?"

"Oh, Tim!" she said. "You *must* know how she feels about you! She must think it was *you* who stabbed Pembroke Jones."

Timothy continued to stare.

"But why on earth would I want to stab Jones?" he asked. "The girl must have been off her head if she really thought that!"

"Take the suggestion or leave it," said Diana. Timothy, recovering, laughed.

“Which women’s magazines do you patronise?” he asked. “And let’s have a look at your library list, shall we?”

“Have it your own way,” said Diana calmly. “When you have eliminated the impossible, what remains must be the truth. She must have thought she was protecting somebody by her confession, and, judging from what I’ve seen of her—little enough, I grant you, but that little has been significant—unless she thought she was protecting one of her own children, whom it is impossible to think of as the stabber of a grown man, (as you will be the first to admit), well, we are left with you. After all, apart from any warmer feelings which she may have for you, she has plenty of cause for being grateful to you, hasn’t she?”

“And plenty of cause for being the reverse. She’d never be in this mess, remember, if I hadn’t interfered in her affairs in the first place.”

“But you couldn’t be expected to know that it would land her in a mess,” argued Diana. “You were only playing Don Quixote.”

“I’ll take jolly good care never to do it again.”

“What you need, you know,” said Diana, with a glance at her husband, “is a wife. She’d keep you out of mischief.”

“Thanks very much! You and my sister might be identical twins,” said Timothy sourly.

# CHAPTER TWENTY

## The Iconoclast

As befitted a man in perfect health and with no money troubles, Timothy was usually a sound sleeper, but on that first night in Shrewsbury he found that his mind was too busy to make immediate slumber possible. He lay wide-eyed, therefore, passing in review all that had happened on the evening of the Nanradoc banquet and in trying to deduce what had caused Marion to believe that he was the person who had stabbed Pembroke Jones.

He had a retentive memory, both visual and aural, and he employed it that night in re-creating the scenes and in recalling the conversations of that extraordinary evening. One or two points were significant and one thing had never been explained. That was the business of Pembroke Jones's car. The moving of it half a mile down the road towards the village could only be regarded, he supposed, as an unkind and thoughtless practical joke. There had been a party of boisterous and slightly inebriated young people present, those who had made off with the steak-knives. It was easy enough to imagine them playing some senseless prank. What it was impossible to imagine was how they had managed to get into the car in order to drive off. Presumably Pembroke would have locked it when he arrived. It was also locked when the Parsons and Timothy had found it. They had watched Leonie unlock it. He could swear to that.

The only answer which made any kind of sense was that Pembroke, on leaving the dinner-table, had driven it off down the road, and then, feeling the call of nature, had walked back to the castle and into the woods. But that did not make any real sense, either. What was to prevent him, at such a late hour and on such a lonely highway as the Pass of Nanradoc, from relieving himself at the roadside? And if, in the brilliant moonlight, he had not cared to do that, why not have driven straight back and then gone into the shelter of the woods? Why walk? There was nothing wrong with the car. Leonie had tested it and he himself had driven it back to the castle.

Then an explanation came to him. It seemed far-fetched at first, but, the more he examined it, the more it seemed to him that it was, at any rate, the least unlikely of the possible solutions. He himself had already suggested part of it, he remembered. It concerned Leonie. If Leonie had stabbed Pembroke—and, although they seemed, on the surface, compatible, he could imagine less likely things—she might have decided that she preferred not to be among those present when his wounded body was found.

She was an intelligent woman. She had worked out that if her own car was missing when the Parsons and Timothy were ready (and were the last) to go home, they would be compelled to offer her a lift. The suggestion had been made by Parsons that he should drive her back to her home in Mold, but, since her own car had to be found (for she would scarcely have felt prepared to abandon it) she herself, he remembered, had mentioned that Pembroke had probably gone to the hotel in the village for a drink. This, of course, was not unlikely, except for the lateness of the hour.

The village was in the opposite direction to her home. The car had been located and, at that point, Timothy had put himself in the position of cat's-paw number one, he reflected ruefully, by offering to drive it back to Nanradoc and shout for Pembroke there, while the others, Leonie



included, had gone on to the hotel to see whether Pembroke had reached it. This ensured that it was someone other than Leonie who came upon the wounded man. It was possible, thought Timothy (she had been compelled to admit that she and her husband had had a row in order to account for his defection) that Leonie expected him to find a dead man. The darkness of the wood probably accounted for the fact that she had misjudged her aim, although, apparently, not by much. (His former theory he abandoned.)

What reason she could have had for wishing Pembroke so much harm it was impossible to say. The fact that Pembroke had refused to press charges must mean, as Timothy had decided from the beginning, that he knew who had attacked him. The further fact that he and Leonie were still living together seemed to indicate that the incident was closed. That Leonie had seen the monk and Marion at Nanradoc that night was so much moonshine. That could be taken for granted.

Whether the police had tested the knife for fingerprints Timothy did not know. They certainly had not taken the dabs of anybody who had been present at the party. That was a pity, in a way, because it would probably have cleared Marion if Pembroke had decided to invoke the law. One thing in Leonie's favour, he supposed, was that none of them had noticed any bloodstains on her clothing. Then he remembered that, although she had worn evening dress at the dinner, she had had on a full-length, long-sleeved evening wrap and gloves when she got into Parsons's car. If her hand and bare arm and the front of her gown had been splashed with Pembroke's blood—and, with that particular stab-wound, it need scarcely have spurted at all—she would have been able to cover up the marks all right.

He turned over in bed and, bouncing himself into a position of comfort, continued to meditate. His problem was based on Diana's assertion—it amounted to that—that Marion was in love with him. However true that might be—

he retained a recollection of a foolish occasion on which she had thrown herself into his arms and he had taken her on to his knee in what (he had believed when he did it) was a sublimely platonic manner, but which she might have interpreted rather differently—there surely could have been no reason for her to think that he had stabbed Pembroke Jones.

Timothy pondered over this, and the answer made him sit up in bed and laugh. She must have thought that he was in love with Leonie and had attempted, therefore, to put Pembroke out of the way. If she really thought that, she must be extremely simple-minded, he thought, as he lay down again and readjusted the bedclothes. He went over those encounters of his with Leonie when Marion had been present, but could think of nothing in his own conversation and conduct which should have given rise to an idea that he thought of Leonie as anything but the merest acquaintance. Leonie, of course, was one of those women who flirt, unconsciously or, at least, instinctively, with every man they meet. She called him Timmy, a diminutive of his name which Marion herself did not employ, and evoked, he supposed, a show of gallantry in himself by way of automatic response.

He thought over what Diana Parsons had said about Marion. She was the self-sacrificing type. Look at the way she half-starved herself, and denied herself the pleasures that were the prerogative of her age and generation, in order to look after those children. Yes, if Marion believed that he had tried to kill Pembroke, it was *just* possible that she would have taken the blame, leaving him (Timothy grinned and then grimaced at the thought) to take care of the children while she was in prison.

At the idea of himself as the father of three, he thumped his pillow, settled himself for slumber to shut out the horrid vision this conjured up, and dropped off to sleep. Immediately after breakfast on the following morning he

drove to the nearest garage, had the tank re-charged and the tyres checked, and then drove north to Chester.

It was a city of which he was fond, although he preferred Winchester and York, and when he had garaged his car at the hotel where he proposed to have lunch and had had a drink, he spent the rest of the time before one o'clock in strolling about and looking, with what he called his Phisbe eye, at the city walls, the unique shopping arcade called the Rows, the exterior of the rose-coloured Cathedral and the beautiful half-timbered houses. During his peregrinations, which were leisurely in the extreme, he located the art gallery which he proposed to visit as soon as he had had lunch.

As befitted its function, it turned out to be a lovely old house of the mid-sixteenth century, its panelled walls and Tudor ceilings benignly sheltering the modern paintings and sculpture which were on display in its ground-floor and first-floor rooms. He inspected these, bought ("to be sent to you later, sir, when the exhibition closes, if I may have your name and address, sir") a small, repulsive oil which was catalogued as *Martha With Canary*, (neither Martha nor the canary, of course, being visible except, perhaps, to the eye of the artist himself), and then enquired for Mr. Hugo. He was directed to proceed downstairs and apply at a door marked *Office*.

Mr. Hugo turned out to be a suave but pleasant Jew, exquisitely mannered, equally exquisitely tailored, with beautiful hands and a public-school accent. Timothy introduced himself, was remembered as having been at some time—the fine hands waved discreet apology that their owner did not recall the exact date—in correspondence with the gallery, and stated his business. Summing up Mr. Hugo as a man with whom it would be useless and rather undignified to attempt to fence, he came to the point at once.

"I know you are not expecting him to exhibit again until the spring, but I've come on behalf of Mr. Pembroke Pritchard Jones—a personal matter which Mr. Jones did not feel able to deal with himself."

"A personal matter? I see. I was so sorry to read in the papers of his terrible loss."

(So it was going to be pretty plain sailing, thought Timothy.)

"You see, the police are questioning some unfortunate young woman, Mr. Jones's cousin," he said, "in connection with the affair, whereas Mr. Jones is convinced that the guilty party is someone who must have been living in the house with Miss Olwen Jones at the time. Unfortunately, he has insufficient evidence of the relationship which existed between his sister and this party—parties, actually; there were two people involved—to go to the police with his theories and clear this cousin of his."

"I see. What I do not quite see is how I can help him."

"It's a long shot, I know, but he thinks she met these people in Chester, possibly here. You see, Mr. Jones and his sister had had a pretty bad quarrel, so he thought it a bit odd that she should have troubled to come here about a couple of years ago to look at his pictures. He wondered, therefore, whether . . ." Timothy stopped, for the dark eyes which, so far, had betrayed nothing but polite, if guarded, interest, had suddenly widened.

"Hullo," said Timothy to himself, "I've struck oil. Now what?"

"So that's what it was!" said Mr. Hugo. "We thought at the time she was drunk. The paintings, of course, were written off as a dead loss. We accepted responsibility, and we are always fully covered by insurance, so Mr. Jones received, in every case, his reserve price for the paintings, less our commission. Well, at the earnest entreaty of Miss Leonie Bing, who also exhibits here from time to time and is, as you probably know, his wife, we wrote to Mr. Jones, when

we sent his cheque, in congratulation that the paintings had been sold. Miss Bing pointed out how very distressed he would be if he ever found out what his sister had done to them, and, naturally, we quite saw the force of her argument.”

“This is all news to me,” said Timothy, careful to keep excitement out of his voice. “What, exactly, *had* she done to them?”

“Slashed them and ripped them to pieces. Six of his best paintings were utterly destroyed before we could get to her and stop her. She threatened my attendant with the knife when he attempted to intervene, and he had to call on myself and Miss Leonie Bing for help before we could disarm her.”

“Weren’t there other people in the gallery—other visitors, I mean?”

“Oh, no. She must have bided her time and waited until that particular room was empty. My attendant was in an adjoining room from which he had just shown a party of American visitors downstairs to the sculpture gallery, which is on this floor, of course, and he did not immediately grasp what was happening in the next room. I suspect him of loitering in order to count and rejoice over the tips which I feel sure the Americans had given him, but I do not blame him for that. A good man is entitled to gloat over his pickings, and Salaman is a very good man indeed. He has a gift for pointing out the beauties of the most unbeautiful paintings, and therefore getting us a sale for them, and is worth twice the money I pay him, although, when he points this out, it would be unbusinesslike in me to admit it. However, I am afraid I’m wandering from the point.”

“Not at all,” said Timothy. “It’s clear that, wherever Miss Olwen Jones met these two people I mentioned, she did not meet them here, unless, of course, she visited the galleries on other occasions.”

"That, of course, I could not say. We charge for admission, as you know, but we do not keep a visitors' book. Is there any other way in which I can help you?"

"No, I think not. It is most obliging of you to have been bothered with me."

"Not at all. Only too pleased. And so kind of you to have bought one of Mr. Ribb's paintings. He will be so delighted."

"How on earth did you know I'd bought one?"

"Oh, the inter-comm." He waved a hand at it. "How else could Salaman have summoned Miss Bing and myself so quickly on the melancholy occasion I have outlined to you?"

"Yes, you mentioned that you and Miss Bing went to your attendant's assistance. Where was Mr. Jones, then?"

"At his home. When there is an exhibition of his work or of hers, they take it in turns to drive into Chester and either show up as the artist, or stroll around the gallery praising the other's works in order to bump up sales. It does, too," said Mr. Hugo, with great satisfaction.

"Yes, I see. Miss Bing must be a woman of considerable courage if she was prepared to tackle somebody who was armed with a knife sharp enough to slash canvases."

"Oh, a woman of immense courage, and, one may say, hopping mad at the destruction of her husband's finest pictures. She has great strength, too, of course. All that bashing away at stone, especially in the preliminary stages of sculpture before one gets to the finer work, you know, needs a considerable amount of energy."

"Yes, I suppose it must," said Timothy. "Well, thank you again. Good-bye."

He went into the street and mopped his brow. So that was it! It no longer mattered about tracing the first meeting between Olwen Jones and the Birds. The Woodpecker and the Crow were out of it. The police had been right. The Birds were only petty criminals, after all. The major crime of murder was, and always would be, beyond their scope. They had found and buried the body.

He directed his steps, urged by some inner prompting, towards the Cathedral, and went inside. He wanted to think things out, and this seemed a better place than his car in which to put his thoughts in order.

The fourteenth century was not his favourite architectural period. It had produced Geoffrey Chaucer and King Edward III, but neither of these was an architect. It had also produced the Black Death. So far as architecture was concerned, he considered that it had bowdlerised the severe but beautiful and sophisticated simplicity of Early English by giving it (as the Victorians are said to have given the legs of their furniture, which is to say, unintentional vulgarity) church windows with geometric and curvilinear tracery, and had embellished its pillar capitals with lush and unnecessary carvings in the form of natural foliage and flowers.

The interior of Chester Cathedral, however, was far better, to his way of thinking, than the red sandstone exterior as seen from the south-east. The north transept was that of the original church built by Hugh Lupus, the Norman Earl of Chester and Lord of the Welsh Marches. The first rebuilding had taken place between the end of the thirteenth and the beginning of the fourteenth century. Then the monks of St. Oswald's—for the building had not become a Cathedral until the time of King Henry VIII—had begun alterations which had been interrupted by the Black Death. Then had come the work of the fifteenth and early-sixteenth-century abbots, and whether this was an improvement on the planning of the fourteenth-century monks could only (Timothy thought) be a matter for conjecture.

He seated himself in the thirteenth-century vestibule to the Chapter House where, in addition to finding the starkness of the pillars and arches soothing to his chaotic thoughts, there was little likelihood that he would be troubled for long at a time by the visitors who thronged the nave and chancel.

For twenty minutes or so he brooded. Then, still with his mind only partly made up, he returned to the art gallery. Mr. Hugo received him in his former courteous and urbane manner. His first words, after they had exchanged greetings, surprised Timothy. They were: "I expected you back."

"You did? I can't think why."

"Oh, surely!" said the smiling, handsome Jew. "I can put two and two together, you know."

"Well," said Timothy, "the thing is, what am I going to do about it?"

"I'm afraid I can't advise you."

"You can help me to sort things out. Look here—and please believe that the last thing in my mind is to be offensive—but how much would your galleries stand to lose if Leonie Bing got a life-sentence?"

"I cannot say. It would depend upon how long she is able to keep up her present standard of work, which is excellent and, of course, saleable. But there is another thing. If Leonie Bing went to prison for murdering her husband's sister, I could not undertake to say what would be the effect on Pembroke Jones, and his work is not only excellent, but, as pictures command a readier sale than sculpture, he is much more valuable to us as a potential asset than is his wife."

"You mean he might stop painting?"

"Oh, no. They never do that. I mean that, although it would go on, his work might be different, inferior, even superior, to what he is doing today. One cannot surmise."

"And it might not be so readily saleable?"

"Do not mistake me, Mr. Herring. There is more to it than the money. I grant you that I am not in this business for my health, as they say. I like money. Who does not? But if *all* I wanted was money, well, with my background and my connections—I have a brother in Hatton Garden, my father was a banker with a European reputation, my cousin owns a



chain of motels in America—I could do far better for myself than I do here.”

“I’m sorry,” said Timothy. “I didn’t mean to be cynical. The point is that I’m desperately worried.”

“Well, I am not. Let us face this issue. If anybody—I mean this cousin whom Pembroke Jones has in mind—is convicted, I think that you and I must come forward with what we know to be the truth. If the police drop the case, then I do not think it wrong for us to keep silence. It is, in a way, *The Doctor’s Dilemma* all over again, I know, but this time I think we must put the artist first as long as ever we can. Do you agree?”

“Is Leonie Bing—is Pembroke Jones—I mean, are they all that good?”

“Posterity must decide that,” said the Jew, with his charming smile, “but I think we might at least give posterity a chance to make the decision. Don’t you?”

“I shall tell Leonie Bing what I think. I shall not, of course, involve you in any way.”

“Thank you. I would rather you did not, unless it becomes essential. My relationship with her and with Pembroke Jones would suffer, and that, from all points of view, would be a pity. Well, good-bye, Mr. Herring, and good luck. Don’t roam dark alleys after nightfall.”

With mutual esteem and, on Timothy’s side, a considerable amount of relief and respect, they parted.

# CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

## The Stately Home

Timothy had tea at the hotel where he had left his car and then drove the short distance to Mold. He did not relish the thought of confronting Leonie Bing, but he had the normal human urge to get a distasteful business over as soon as possible. In one respect, and an important one from his point of view, he was fortunate. He found her alone in the house. The charwoman had gone home and Pembroke had taken the children and Marion to Timothy's house in the Cotswolds.

"She said you had promised to give them a home for a bit," said Leonie. "So awfully good of you to have made the arrangement, Timmy darling. It's lovely to have the bungalow to ourselves again."

"Did you say, 'and Marion'? Is she in the clear, then?"

"Oh, yes. She was only *assisting* the police. You didn't think they were going to arrest her, did you?"

"I wasn't at all sure about it."

"Well, I'm sorry you've come here for nothing, if you were expecting to see her."

"I didn't come expecting to see her. I came to see you."

"Oh, Timmy darling, this is so sudden!"

"Look, let me come to the point."

"You're looking terribly serious. Come on in here and sit down. Would you care for a drink?"

"No, thanks. Look, Leonie, I've just come from the Chester galleries—those private ones run by a chap named Hugo."

"Oh . . . yes?"

"He told me about the trouble when Jones's sister went there."

"Oh, did he? So what?"

"So nothing—unless somebody—unless the wrong person gets charged with murdering Olwen."

"I see. Thank you, Timmy. You're a gent. Does—er—does Hugo—?"

"Yes, he came to the same conclusion as I did. It's the truth, I suppose?"

"Yes, it is, and I'd do it again. Oh, Tim! Pembroke's best work! The finest things he'd ever done! Wouldn't *you* have wanted to kill her?"

"Yes, of course."

"But you don't think you'd have done it?"

"Only because I'd have funk'd being found out."

"You know, Timmy, I only held myself in at the actual time because of my darling Hugo. I didn't want to get his galleries a bad name. I call him my darling Hugo because, except for you, he's the only man I know whom it would be impossible for me to seduce."

"You're a bitch," said Timothy, admiringly.

"And you're the sea-green incorruptible," she retorted.

"Oh, no," said Timothy, grinning. "Merely a shy gazelle."

"Other business?" asked the president, who was in the chair at the committee meeting.

"Yes," said Timothy. "Got the dope there, Coningsby? Thanks. Mr. President, ladies and gentlemen, you will remember that in the late summer or early autumn of last year, I invited members of the Society and their friends to

partake of a so-called medieval banquet at a place in North Wales.”

“Nanradoc Castle. Most enjoyable,” said a member.

“Perfectly thrilling! And so marvellously romantic afterwards, walking about among the ruins, especially in that delightfully creepy old tower!” said a woman member.

“Yes,” said Timothy, “and it became even more delightfully creepy a bit later on, didn’t it?”

“Oh, I’m so sorry! Tactless, tactless,” said the woman member, distressed.

“Not at all,” said Timothy. “The subject of its creepiness had to come up before this meeting ended. Well, Mr. President, ladies and gentlemen, I have been asked by a number of those who were present on that occasion to make it an annual affair, but by subscription.” There was polite applause. “If enough people want it—that is to say, if a sufficient number of the members of this committee think it a good idea . . .”

“Just a moment,” put in the member who liked to think himself a thorn in Timothy’s flesh, “pardon the interruption, Herring—Mr. Honorary Secretary, I should say—but, Mr. President, sir, hadn’t we better decide, before Mr. Herring goes on, exactly what is meant by ‘a sufficient number’? I speak, of course, under correction, but would it not be best to define our terms?”

“By all means,” said the president. “Well, there are thirty members present, besides myself. Will somebody make a proposal?”

It was finally agreed that if twenty of those present decided that the Nanradoc banquet would be a desirable annual event, Timothy would arrange it. The voting was twenty-five in favour, four against, and one abstention—Timothy.

“Right,” he said. “We can leave the date open for the present. This brings me to my next point. Mr. Pembroke Pritchard Jones, the owner of the Nanradoc estate, is

prepared to let us have Nanradoc at a peppercorn rent, provided that we will do up the house and keep it in repair and the grounds in order. The details, of course, would be a matter for the solicitors on both sides to arrange if we decided to accept what I personally believe to be a very generous offer."

"I hope the honorary secretary is not suggesting that this meeting should decide, here and now, whether or not to accept this 'very generous offer,'" said the thorn in Timothy's flesh.

"Of course not," said Timothy, smiling kindly at him. "You mustn't over-excite yourself, my dear chap. Bad for the blood-pressure. With the consent of Mr. President and this committee, I shall circulate—or, rather, poor old Coningsby will circulate—a full description, to all members, of the house and the estate, complete with plan and elevation, and copies of the very fine photographs he took of the castle at one time, and call for a postal vote. Should the result be favourable, I shall have certain suggestions to put before the next committee meeting. The castle, which I have already purchased, I shall make over to the Society in any case, but with one proviso."

"That we fill in the horrible well!" said the woman member who had found the castle thrilling, romantic, and delightfully creepy.

"Oh, nonsense!" exclaimed a youthful member. "Spoil the whole thing! Where's the point, anyway? The—what was found in it has been decently buried, and the well," he concluded, with the relentless logic of the young, "will still be there, whether you fill it in or not."

"We have not allowed Herring to finish what he was saying," the president mildly pointed out.

"I was only going to say," said Timothy, "that, having gone to a considerable amount of trouble . . ."

"And expense," said a member who was, himself, an extremely wealthy man.

“All right, and expense,” Timothy agreed, “to have the castle reasonably well restored, I want to open it to the public at a small fee, the money to help pay a curator.”

There was no suggestion of disagreement over this. Even the thorn in the flesh conceded that of course the public must be allowed the privilege of visiting a genuine Welsh-Welsh (as opposed to an English-Welsh) castle.

Timothy, whose ethics (as opposed to his morals) were never entirely above suspicion, inserted a statement in his circular which had not received the consent of the committee for the good and sufficient reason that he had not brought it before that body. This was that, in the event of the postal vote being in favour of acquiring the lease of Nanradoc House and its grounds on such advantageous terms as were set out in the folder, would members also vote on the question of whether they would like to consider turning the house into a country club for members and their families on terms more reasonable than would be the case for comparable accommodation elsewhere. There would be a full time staff, including a first-class cook and a resident housekeeper.

He and Coningsby sent off the circulars, Timothy with his fingers crossed, Coningsby in a flutter of mingled horror and joy in respect of his own connivance at immorality, for, to go even half-way behind the committee's back was, to him, indescribably, delightfully wicked. Timothy's fingers were crossed because he proposed to offer Marion the job of housekeeper at Nanradoc, and to employ a resident chauffeur to meet visitors who did not possess cars, and whose duties would include taking Marion's children to and from school every day. He had a feeling that this would clear his conscience.

While he was waiting for the replies to come in, he lived at his club and went along every morning to help Coningsby check the post and count the members' votes. One day the postman was later than usual, so Timothy was glancing over

the morning paper while he was waiting. A paragraph caught his eye. Ignatius and Claribel Birds had been sentenced to seven years and five years, respectively, for uttering counterfeit notes. The actual forgers had not been discovered so far, but the police expected to make an arrest at any moment.

“Poor old Woodpecker and Crow,” thought Timothy. “Stepped out of their class at last.” All the same, it was with a sense of relief that he realised that they were accounted for and might be considered to have gone out of his life for good. The activities of Father Ignatius at the Phisbe headquarters still puzzled him, however. He said to Coningsby,

“Can you think of any reason why anybody should want to charge about this house at night and fling furniture about.”

“Oh, that! It still goes on, Mr. Herring. Mrs. Dewes was telling me about it. It’s only a mild visitation, and she’s getting used to it.”

“What do you mean?”

“The phenomena would suggest that we have a poltergeist, sir. It does no harm. Its most frequent manifestations are to make a certain amount of noise in the committee room and to leave a poker on the Dewes’s bed.”

“Oh, rot!” said Timothy, startled.

“The evidence of poltergeist existence is very convincing, sir. The interesting thing about this one is that the phenomena are persisting—although, Mrs. Dewes tells me, in a continually weakening form—even though the children—children are usually the unwitting vehicles, so to speak, of poltergeist activity—have been gone now for a very considerable time.”

“Oh, well!” said Timothy. “More things in heaven and earth, and all that, I suppose. Hullo! That sounds like the postman!”

On both counts, when the time-limit had been reached, and all the returns which might be expected had come in, the voting was almost wholly favourable. The committee was not inclined to be critical of Timothy's plan for the use of the house—very far from it, in fact. They also proved to be enthusiastic about Timothy's plan to instal Marion as housekeeper at Nanradoc, but some added that they thought the well ought to be filled in.

Most of the members of Phisbe, however, accustomed to the discovery of skulls in church crypts and to the examination of the stomach-turning rebuses in some of our great cathedrals, had no scruples about leaving the well as it was.

Besides, although, to do it justice, the Society was far too dignified to wish for such advertisement, the fact that Olwen Jones's body had been found in a well, down which (protected by a strong iron grill) the morbid-minded public was empowered to gawp, did bring the customers along to Nanradoc in considerable and lucrative numbers, as things turned out.

"After all," as one well-satisfied tourist remarked to the custodian, "it does somehow seem to make it a sort of place of pilgrimage, you know."

Anxious to put his proposition about Nanradoc to Marion, Timothy reached his home in the Cotswolds at well past midnight, but there was a light in a downstairs window. He let himself in, certain that the servants would be in bed, and found Marion seated by a fire that was almost out. She turned, with a startled exclamation, when he came in, jumped up out of her chair, then stretched out both hands to him. Timothy took them in his own and said lightly,

"So you found your way all right?"

"Pembroke brought us as soon as the police had done with me. Oh, Tim, we couldn't possibly have gone on staying



there! It was horrible! They did nothing but bicker, and there was more than one downright scene. It was so awfully bad for the children. One thing it taught me, though."

"Oh?" said Timothy, leading her back to her chair and putting her gently but inexorably into it. "What was that?"

"That Leonie was the person who stabbed Pembroke. Of course, she adores him really. It was one of those passionate Italian-style stabbings, I believe. It was when they'd had a row over Miranda. Pembroke wanted his baby, but Leonie wanted Pembroke all to herself. You know, Tim, she's like a tigress."

"I think she probably *is* a tigress," said Timothy. "Now, look, aren't you very tired?"

"Only of being questioned by the police, though I must say they were very nice to me. I mean, they kept giving me cups of tea and cigarettes, and they didn't grill me, and two men and a policewoman took me back to Mold each day, and came and fetched me again in the morning. I suppose they could have kept me at the police-station if they'd wanted to."

"Obvious they were pretty certain you hadn't done anything wrong. What made them finish with you in the end?"

"Well," she said, twisting her hands together, "I referred them to school, and all that, and they found that, at about the time they think Olwen was killed, I wasn't even in England."

"Oh, really? That's interesting. Where were you, then?"

"It was just before I took on Bryn and Bron, and ages before I had Miranda. I was on a year's exchange, and teaching in Australia. It's a scheme whereby teachers in the two countries swap jobs for twelve months. It's supposed to be a good thing, and it certainly turned out to be a good thing for me, as it happened."

"Yes, indeed. I suppose the police had to keep the tabs on you while your statement was being investigated. Now,

before I pack you off to bed, where you ought to have been hours ago, here's how I see the future . . ."

"Please—not tonight, Tim." She stood up and faced him.

"All right. Up you go, then. Good night—although, by what my watch tells me, it's good morning, so I shan't bother to go to bed."

"May virtue be its own reward!" said Marion bitterly, as she turned away.

## About the Author



Gladys Mitchell was born in the village of Cowley, Oxford, in April 1901. She was educated at the Rothschild School in Brentford, the Green School in Isleworth, and at Goldsmiths and University Colleges in London. For many years Miss Mitchell taught history and English, swimming, and games. She retired from this work in 1950 but became so bored without the constant stimulus and irritation of teaching that she accepted a post at the Matthew Arnold School in Staines, where she taught English and history, wrote the annual school play, and coached hurdling. She was a member of the Detection Club, the PEN, the Middlesex

Education Society, and the British Olympic Association. Her father's family are Scots, and a Scottish influence has appeared in some of her books.